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"IT'S GOOD-NIGHT, MISTER GRIP-SACK!" MALICIOUSLY GRINNED THE CHIEF SERAPH
AS HE HALF TURNED TO DEPART.

OR,

The Seraphs of Sodom.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE NAMELESS SPORT," "OLD '49,"
"A ROYAL FLUSH," "PISTOL JOHNNY,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FAIR YOUNG HUNTRESS.

"I WONDER if— Good-evening!"

That was hardly where Sidney Harper expected to bring up when he began that muttered query, but, even as circumstances are said to alter cases, just so unexpected events will sometimes change the situation and transform the passive into the active; and it was the wholly unexpected that happened just then.

The clear, whip-like crack of a rifle rung out smartly on the afternoon air, and at the same instant Harper felt a slight shock just above his left hip, and caught the peculiar sound of a bullet cutting through leather.

He did not have to guess what that meant; as

by instinct he knew that his seldom-absent grip-sack of tough alligator leather had saved him from injury, if not death.

With a swift, cat-like bound that spoke well for his muscles, as for his cool nerve in times of danger, Harper sought cover, crouching down behind a gray boulder, placing its broadside between his precious person and the quarter from whence that bit of lead must have been sped.

"Turn about's fair play, and that's a jewel of the first water!" said Harper, with a grim, fleeting smile on his strong face as he cocked a revolver, flashing a keen glance over the hillside in quest of his assailant. "You've chipped, and now it's my— Holy smoke!"

Another sentence curtailed, and by the same agency; but this time the shock was heavier, and the surprise more complete.

The smell of burning powder and the angry hum of lead had long since ceased to be a novelty to "Grip-sack Sid Harper," and while on such expeditions as the present, he naturally anticipated something of the sort. If it came, he counted it all in the day's work. If it failed, then he considered himself just so much ahead of the game.

But this was the first time he had ever been selected as a target by a young and charming woman.

Only for a movement on her part, just then, Sid Harper would have failed to see her, for she was far to the left of the line which he had instinctively marked as the course of that bit of lead, and instead of being far up the hillside, she was very near on the same level with himself.

Half-bewilderedly Grip-sack Sid glanced down at his grip, noting the little hole through the leather, and at the same time recalling the position which he had occupied when that shot was fired.

"She couldn't—unless her gun can shoot around a corner! Ha!" with eager interest blazing in his keen gray eyes as they followed the further movements of the fair young amazon. "Can she be chipping in on my side?"

He saw the girl—for in her short skirts, adapted to the mountains, the young woman seemed hardly more—raise her rifle, its muzzle pointing up the hill at an obtuse angle with his present position. By following that line of aim, he saw that her target must be in or near yonder scrubby pine tree; and just as the weapon exploded, he caught sight of a bird, drawn rigidly erect on a limb, close to the rusty trunk of the tree.

Only for an instant; then, whirling end over end, madly beating the air with its strong wings, the headless grouse came pitching downward in obedience to that perfect aim, sending out a tiny cloud of feathers as its fat carcass struck the stones, bouncing down the steep slope, coming to a halt at the edge of a clump of bushes, tangled with briars and vines.

"Sorry—but I couldn't miss twice, you know!" laughed the young amazon, lightly, following her game with her bright eyes as she pressed the spring that caused her little rifle to open, then extracting the empty shell. "It looks cruel, but birds were made to eat, and— *Scat!* you ugly beast!"

Broken sentences seemed the rule, that afternoon, for while the fair young huntress was watching the dying struggles of the grouse she had so neatly decapitated, a gaunt, thick-limbed, shaggy-furred wild-cat sprang out from its covert in the briars, and pouncing upon the bird, held it with forepaws while snarling defiance at its rightful owner above.

With a rapidity that told how familiar she was with the neat little Stevens, the girl pushed a fresh cartridge into its chamber and closed the rifle, lifting it to her cheek and catching sight through the Lyman sights with which the weapon was provided, all in a single breath.

At the spiteful crack, the cat doubled up and rolled over, squalling furiously and making the stones fly in a shower by its savage paw-strokes. But then, its fur turned the wrong way in its vicious rage, the cat faced about, straining its strong muscles for the leap.

Sid Harper had caught the significant song of a glancing bullet, and now he could trace the bloody furrow cut just above the eyes of the beast, showing that the fault lay in the tiny missile, not in the aim of the fair huntress. Striking that dense skull at an angle, the .22-caliber bullet had glanced off, enraging rather than disabling the cat of the mountains.

With a low, startled cry, Grip-sack Sid rose to his feet in the act of rushing to the rescue, though instinct told him he must be too late to be of service unless something more than good fortune interposed to save the stranger.

Before he could do more than that, the end came.

The little Stevens flew open, the empty shell was replaced by a loaded cartridge, and even as the wild-cat left the ground in its mad bound, the nickel-plated weapon flew to the shoulder of its mistress.

Never flinching, she tried to catch the cat with the ivory bead through the round aperture of the rear sight as it came snarling through the air, but she knew that another wasted shot might easily prove fatal, infuriated as the wild-

cat now was, and though she held it covered through all its mighty leap, she did not fire. With such a tiny bullet and minute charge of powder, she dared take no chances.

The cat alighted in a furry ball, not a dozen feet away, and like a ball it seemed to rebound the same instant it struck the stones, but that infinitesimal pause was sufficient for the huntress, and, as the little white bead covered one flaming yellow eye, she touched trigger.

Dropping the rifle, she sprang swiftly aside, none too soon to escape that hairy catapult.

Snarling, yowling, scattering the stones with its bony legs as it struck out blindly, blood and brains oozing from an eyeless socket, through which the little bullet had forced its way, the death-stricken cat was still dangerous enough to deserve close attention.

That the young amazon quickly gave the beast, steadying herself with one hand on a ragged boulder as she rapidly emptied a small but serviceable revolver into that hairy bunch of malignity.

All this transpired with such rapidity that prompt to act as Sidney Harper usually was, he had not time to fairly leave his covert before all was over, and his assistance was no longer needed.

"Run, Inza!" just then sounded a masculine voice, coming from a point nearer the roaring river. "Run, and dodge! I'll save you or perish in the attempt! I'll die a thousand deaths before one hair of you dear— *Ugh!*"

A trip and a clumsy fall cut that heroic sentence short, and under cover of this, Grip-sack Sid returned to his hiding-place, something more than idle curiosity marking his smooth-shaven face.

"There is no more need of your dying than of my running, Mr. Gilchrist," coldly uttered the girl, as the man scrambled to his feet and came rapidly toward her. "The cat is dead." "Sure?" with a dubious glance at the still quivering carcass.

With a quick step Inza moved forward and rested a little foot on the body, her red lips curling with something remarkably like scorn as her dark eyes turned to that florid face.

An even more sluggish brain than that of Oliver Gilchrist could hardly have mistaken her sentiments, and an ugly glow came into his little piggish eyes as he muttered:

"Of course my fears were wholly for you, Inza, and not on my own account. I nearly broke my neck trying to get here in time to rescue you from the ugly brute. I'd have torn it limb from limb with my bare hands—with you looking on, dearest!"

The maiden shrunk back as though from a blow, but quickly rallied, her face pale, her tones cold and subdued as she uttered:

"Thanks, of course, Mr. Gilchrist, but I'm competent to defend myself. Will you let me pass, please?"

By chance or through design, Gilchrist had paused just where he must move aside before the fair huntress could reach her game lying on the lower level.

"You're always in such a blessed hurry, Inza!" he growled, his brows contracting, his thick lips pushing out in an ugly pout.

"I am in haste, just now. I only came out to pick up a bird for father's supper. Yonder it lies, waiting, but you are barring the way."

"The bird can wait, and so can the old gent, for that matter," the lout grinned, his clumsy figure seeming to grow broader as he filled the narrow passage. "Come, Inza, don't be so awful skittish with a poor fellow. You haven't given me a chance for the past two weeks to even hint how dearly I love—"

He left the sentence incomplete, ducking his head and lifting an elbow as a guard, his curish nature misinterpreting that swift gesture.

"You must not—I will not listen to such words!" panted the maiden, a red wave passing across her face, only to leave it paler than before.

"How're you going to help yourself?" snapped the rascal, angered by his own betrayal. "You can't run away faster than I can follow, and Fred Benight isn't skulking high enough to jump on a man's back from cover when he isn't looking—more luck for him!"

"Will you permit me to pass, sir?"

"Mr. Benight is an angel, and I'm a devil, of course," with a hard laugh as he squared his broad shoulders, his piggish eyes roving with undisguised admiration over her flushing countenance. "But, he's yonder and I'm here. He's had his innings, and it ended when Laxton kicked him off the ranch. I've waited and watched for mine long enough, and now it's come, I'd be a bigger idiot than I looked if I failed to improve the chance. Now wouldn't I, pretty?"

"Father is waiting for me, Mr. Gilchrist; give way and let me pass, I beg of you," said Inza, her tones low and tremulous, but with a growing fire in her dark eyes that should have warned the cur not to press her too hardly, just then.

"Pay toll, and we'll go arm in arm, darling!" laughed the fellow, bending his head and protruding his lips; only to shrink back with a gasp of terror as the maiden flung forward a

hand, thrusting the muzzle of a revolver fairly against his broad chest.

"On your own head be it, then!" she cried, as the hammer fell.

CHAPTER II.

HOW THE CUR SHOWED HIS TEETH.

THE action was that of one fairly driven to desperation by repeated acts of persecution, but the life of the brute was not fated to rest on those fair hands.

The hammer fell with a dull click on the empty shell, for the weapon had not been reloaded since she emptied it into the writhing carcass of the wild-cat.

Man and woman recoiled from each other, he with a choking cry of craven terror, while she flung the weapon far from her, and leaned against a rock, covering her pale face with her hands, and trembling like a leaf as she murmured, indistinctly:

"How could you! How could you drive me to—I was mad!"

Gilchrist quickly rallied, seeing how completely his adversary was disarmed, in a double sense. He gave the wild-cat a vicious kick.

"A pair of 'em, by glory!" he muttered, an ugly glow coming into his little eyes as he added, barely above his breath: "Your claws are clipped, and it's high time *hers* were!"

He regained his position, looking more evil than ever.

"You didn't really mean it, Inza? You didn't mean to shoot me?"

"I did—you forced me to it," huskily replied the girl, but without uncovering her face. "I warned you not to—"

"But that means rank murder, girl!"

"If so, whose the fault?" flashed Inza, lifting her head, her dark eyes flashing vividly.

"I only—"

"Drove me to desperation! How dared you ask—"

"A kiss?" sneered Gilchrist, as she abruptly broke off with flushing face. "Surely that is no killing matter. The time'll come when you'll do the offering, pretty. Then—who knows?" with a low, chuckling laugh as he watched her changing features. "Maybe I'll play skittish, just to even up!"

There were no tears visible in those proud orbs now, for they were dried by the hot fire backing them. And as Inza stepped forward a pace, her tones were cold and steady:

"Once more, Mr. Gilchrist, permit me to pass!"

"Once more, Inza Laxton, don't you be in such a mighty rush," retorted the rascal, actually seeming to enjoy the situation thus brought about. "The grouse won't spoil, and the old gent will have all the better appetite for his supper."

"Do you mean to keep me here by force?"

"If coaxing won't serve—bet your sweet life, pretty!" nodded Oliver, with an ugly grin spreading over his putty face. "I'm tired chasing after you, and now I've got you fairly rounded up, at last, I'll hold my 'vantage until I've put my mark of ownership on you."

"Take care, Oliver Gilchrist!" huskily cried the maiden, with a warning gesture. "Remember how far you drove me but a minute since. My temper is hot—if you try it too severely, both may have bitter cause to repent your brutality!"

Gilchrist laughed coarsely as he glanced toward the brightly-mounted rifle, then in the direction whither Inza had cast her pistol.

"Shooting's played, pretty, and I'm not to be scared by teeth or nails, even if you were virago enough to call them into play. If it wasn't for tempting you, I'd say a kiss for every scratch or bite."

"Coward!"

"But not a fool, little tempest."

"Stand aside and let me pass, or I'll tell father how you have acted."

"What would he do? Grin and bear it, just as he has borne other bluffs, pretty," sneered Gilchrist. "Because he don't *dare* do anything else, you want to understand, my dear."

"He would kill you, like the evil cur you now prove yourself!"

"If he could get in a sure lick from behind, or if he thought it could be done without his hand being seen in the action—granted," laughed Gilchrist.

"You dare not so insult him to his face. You would not dare so insult his daughter, but that you know she is unarmed."

"Right, as to the child, but wrong as to the father, pretty," nodded Oliver. "If I wasn't sure your teeth were drawn, for the moment, I'd hunt cover before taking the curb off my tongue. Did you really mean to shoot me, Inza?"

"You forced me to it. You know my temper. Yet you deliberately drove me to—"

"Because I was half-distracted by having witnessed your peril while unable to rescue you, Inza," something like genuine emotion coming into his face and tones. "Because you showed so plainly how distasteful to you was my love, dearest girl."

"It is distasteful! Worse than that, it is loathsome!" flashed the huntress, her dark eyes glowing.

"Take that back, Inza—say you're only trying me!" his tones growing more and more earnest. "I love you as man never loved before! I fairly worship the ground your little feet touch as you pass me by! I'd give a year for each kind word—I'd go through fire and flood for one smile—I'd give my very soul for a single kiss of true love," and carried away by his mad passion, the fellow stepped forward, with arms outstretched as though to clasp her to his broad bosom.

As far as lay in his coarse nature, Oliver Gilchrist really loved this girl.

Swift as thought her right hand flew up and out, striking him sharply across the lips, causing him to recoil, more from surprised anger than pain, though the stroke carried its sting, too.

"Take that for an answer, you cur!" cried Inza, passionately.

"I will—and pass it on to your father, with double interest," laughed Gilchrist, wiping a hand across his lips.

"He will hunt you out of the country, when I tell him how you have dared insult his daughter!"

"He will crouch down in his kennel with a prayer for mercy when I dangle a noose before his eyes," laughed Oliver, spitefully, still barring the way and rendering it impossible for the maiden to cut short that painful interview by flight.

"Coward—liar!"

"Keep it up, pretty!" grinned Gilchrist, showing his teeth in a vicious grin. "Each epithet adds another unit to the score your daddy will have to pay. And the reckoning will end on the gallows!"

Despite her rare courage, Inza Laxton shrunk back with a low cry of fright at that coward stroke, though she could hardly have explained just why those words should send such a chill through her being.

And yet—was there nothing back of that threat?

With marvelous clearness there came to her memories of various times when her father had shrunk and showed fear in the presence of this rascal and his no less villainous father. She recalled stray words and expressions which she had caught, at odd times, vaguely wondered at then, but seeming worse than blows just now; hints and sentences let drop by Warren Gilchrist, and silently endured by her haggard-faced father.

"Begins to rankle, does it, little angel?" chuckled Oliver, closely watching her changing countenance and placing his own interpretation upon it. "Can you catch a glimpse of the shadow of the noose?"

"What do you mean?" Inza forced herself to ask, trying to read the truth in those lying eyes.

"That it's time you and I came to a more perfect understanding, Inza," replied Gilchrist, his smile fading out, his manner growing more earnest. "I needn't tell you how long and how dearly I have loved you, for that is already more than a twice-told tale."

"To which I positively decline to listen again," sharply interposed the maiden, rallying and confronting him boldly. "Will you give way, or shall I force a passage?"

"Don't I know why you refuse to listen?" his little eyes flashing with an ugly gleam as he showed his teeth. "Not because you object to words of love, but because they don't come just now from the lips of that cursed Fred Benight!"

Once more the young bully invited a blow from a woman, and once more he received it. Full across the lips, and with an emphasis that tinged his yellow teeth with blood in an instant.

"Coward!" flashed Inza, the rich blood mantling her cheeks and fairly increasing her rare beauty. "He is a man! You dare not face him and utter your vile curses!"

"I do not have to," viciously grinned the ruffian, still maintaining his position. "I could, if it was needed, but it isn't. All I have to do is to lift a hand, to utter a single word, and the Seraphs of Sodom will care for Fred Benight—care for him so tenderly that he'll never even try to come back to his own true love—meaning Inza Laxton, pretty!"

The maiden shrunk back with a low cry and a shiver of fear. Not for herself, though an unarmed maiden might well have trembled under that vicious glare. For one who had grown dearer far to her heart than the love of life itself.

"I knew it! You are one of them—you and your terrible father! I felt it almost from the very first, and now I'm sure of it!"

"Is that so?" with a leer of mock surprise, ending in a coarse chuckle. "All right. Keep on thinking that way if it likes you. It may help bring you to reason—who knows?"

"Because—open your shell-like ears, pretty! If I am one of the heads of the Seraphs, you ought to be able to give a tolerable guess as to the extent of my power over life and death in this region. You ought to know that I can condemn, or I can spare, at will. And knowing so much, don't you reckon you've been following the wrong tack in so flatly jilting me, pretty?"

"Will you permit me to pass, sir?"

"Don't be in such a rush, darling. I've hardly

begun to tune up, and there's still a marvelous song to follow. Give a poor devil a fair show, can't you?"

"You shall sup sorrow for all this, I assure you, Oliver Gilchrist! My father will—"

"Thank his stars that I only gave you a hint, instead of blurring out the whole truth," interrupted the cur. "My good right hand against a sweet kiss, pretty, that he'll bid you forget your grief, and try to love your aggriever—meaning my own sweet self."

"And as for Fred Benight, he'll have no say-so in the matter, for his fate is already decided upon. He sealed that when he dared to make love to the girl I had picked out for myself. Only one thing can save him. Shall I tell you what that thing is, Inza?"

"Let me pass, you craven cur!" stepping forward and thrusting her hand against his chest, to push him out of the path.

"Pay toll first, sweetness!" he laughed, catching her hands and drawing her to his bosom.

"I must have my rightful change, or—"

"Here's your rightful change, pardner," cried a clear voice, as two powerful hands closed upon his arms, shaking Inza from his grasp and wheeling him resistlessly about. "Fresh from the mint, too!"

CHAPTER III.

THE GRIP-SACK SHARP.

WITH a howl of mingled rage and fright, Gilchrist tried to break away from his as yet unseen captor, but, despite his bulk and seeming excess of muscle, he was powerless as a child in that grip.

"More kicks than half-pence, Johnny; but where one's as hungry for toll as you play you are, everything goes, down to good leather," and the glib-tongued stranger pointed his remarks by a decidedly personal application.

His sturdy right leg drew back only to shoot forward, depositing the "good leather" where it would do the most good.

"Curse you!" howled Gilchrist, fairly lifted from the ground by the shock, his hands instinctively flying toward his rear, but kick followed kick in regular order, driving the bewildered cur up against a rock too high for him to tumble over, and with such steady force that he absolutely could not tumble down.

"Only a single action, as you may perceive, Johnny; but the recoil loads it, and I'm not mourning over the trouble. Don't have to aim, for every shot's bound to go right where it'll do the most—Eh?"

With a choking yell of pain and fury, Gilchrist whirled about and plunged like a mad bull at his punisher, probably feeling that he could suffer no worse than already was his fortune.

But the stranger proved himself to the full as deft with his hands as he had been with his feet, and while one swift stroke checked that rush, a second sent Oliver reeling back, to slip on his beam-ends at the foot of the boulder, blinded and half-stunned.

"Sit down, Johnny, please, until you can bring your manners with you. The lady—your servant, ma'am," with a neat bow and a genial smile, as he turned to where Inza Laxton was still standing, too greatly disturbed to have as yet thought of seeking safety in flight.

She had been taken by surprise almost as completely as had her brutal suitor, neither of them dreaming of his presence before Sidney Harper sprung around the big rock to break the vicious grip of that young ruffian.

The poor girl had been sorely shaken by the coarse threats of Gilchrist, bravely as she had attempted to parry them; and, now that she had so unexpectedly been set free, the inevitable reaction came, and her tones were hardly articulate as she murmured:

"I thank you, sir—that brute—"

"Will hardly trouble you again, after I'm through with him, ma'am," nodded Harper, his smile altering to a grim earnestness as he turned toward the groaning rascal. "Get up, Johnny. You wanted toll, and I paid you off in the only coin fit for such beggars as you have proved yourself. But, there's still a debt outstanding, and you want to square it in a holy hurry."

"I didn't—I was only fooling!"

"Heap funny, wasn't it?" with a short laugh as his fingers closed upon a shoulder, actually seeming to lift the trembling rascal to his feet without an effort. "Joke goes, and we'll play it out to the end. Forward march—and make your manners, Johnny!"

A circular sweep of that sinewy arm caused Gilchrist to lurch forward until he fairly faced the maiden whom he had so bitterly insulted, and then a deft kick doubled both legs under him, bringing him to his knees with more celerity than grace or comfort.

Inza Laxton shrunk back, that frightened look still in her eyes, but Sidney Harper hastened to reassure her.

"Harmless as a snake with its head cut off, ma'am, and sorry as an African 'coon caught under a hen-roost. He owes you an apology, and I'm here to see that he makes it in good shape."

"I didn't mean—if you hadn't flared up so infer—"

"Too fur, and too fast, Johnny!" warningly interposed Harper, a sinewy pair of fingers closing about the thick neck with a force that threatened the vertebrae. "Take the cue from me, and don't talk as though you had hot mush in your mouth, Say: 'I'm a low-down cur, Miss Laxton, and all there is manly about me is the garments I wear. I'm too contemptibly mean for use as a door-mat, and ten thousand miles below your resentment. That's a mouthful number one, Johnny, and you want to get rid of it in good style while I shape another pill. You *sabe*?"

Gilchrist mumbled something, shivering with terror as he felt that significant grip playing tight and loose about the throat, but, Inza cut his lesson short, brushing swiftly past them, then pausing to breathe a hasty thanks-offering:

"I thank you, sir—I thank you far more than I have power to express, just now. The time may come when I can do more to show my gratitude for your great kindness, but—"

"Stay put, Johnny!" with a parting squeeze at Gilchrist's throat as he turned toward the maiden, that rare smile once more lightning up his strong, honest, if not exactly handsome face.

"Never mention it, ma'am!" his tones growing mellow and almost musical as his keen gray eyes met hers with an electric glow in their depths. "It cost me nothing. Indeed," with a low, amused laugh that revealed his white teeth, "I rather liked it, don't you know?"

Inza lowered her eyes with a deep flush, and murmured something intended for thanks as she once more turned away, eager to leave the spot where she had been called upon to endure so much.

"One moment, Miss Laxton," cried Harper, springing to the spot where the dead grouse lay, picking it up and smoothing its glossy plumage before handing the bird to its rightful owner. "You are forgetting your game, and 'twould be a pity to cheat your father out of his supper. Especially as you earned it so nobly."

A side glance toward the dead wild-cat pointed his meaning, and Inza cast a startled look into his face.

"Then you—surely you were not in sight, then?"

"Well, hardly in sight, you know," hastily responded the other, a faint flush sweeping across his face. "Of course I couldn't have stood idly by with such a brute abusing you. Isn't that your rifle?"

As the best cover to his slip, Harper crossed over to where the discarded weapon lay, also picking up the empty revolver which Inza had cast so passionately from her when it mercifully failed her maddened hand.

As he turned toward the maiden, a short exclamation escaped her lips, and following her glance, Harper saw Gilchrist dodging among the rocks, evidently making the most of that chance to escape paying a further penalty for his brutality.

Swift as thought the sport drew and leveled a revolver, firing with the art of a skilled snapshot.

The rascal flung up his arms, plunging forward upon his face, giving vent to a stifled cry of pain or terror, one could hardly say which. But Inza chose the worst interpretation, and shrunk away from the blandly-smiling sport with a shiver of horror as she gasped:

"You have killed him!"

"Not a bit of it, dear Miss Laxton," with a light laugh as his own weapon vanished from sight, leaving his hands free to tender her both rifle and revolver. "It's against my principles to cheat the hangman, and if faces don't lie most outrageously, that's the precise end yonder cur will come to. Just ventilated his hat, without touching so much as a hair of his head, 'pon honor, ma'am."

Inza shivered anew as she glanced up the hill, noting no evidence of life in that fallen figure, and she murmured:

"He is mean, and vicious, and cruel, but I couldn't wish him such a sudden death as that!"

"Shall I bring him back, to reassure you, Miss Laxton?"

"No—I must go. Father will be worrying at my absence."

"Give him my regards, Miss Laxton."

"You know him, then?" with a swift glance of inquiry; but only to receive a slow shake of the head.

"I hope to make his acquaintance, some day, but I hardly think we ever met in the flesh. You might mention my name: Sidney Harper, better known through these wild and woolly regions, perhaps, as Grip-sack Sid, the Sample Sport, or the Grip-sack Sharp," laughing softly as he tapped the bullet-pierced convenience at his side. "Remarkable place for pinning nicknames fast to a fellow, don't you know?"

With a faintly expressed hope of meeting him under more auspicious circumstances, Inza Laxton took her weapons and the grouse, hurrying away in the direction of her mountain home.

The Grip-sack Sharp followed her with his eyes, a curious smile playing about his strong mouth, a peculiar glow filling his gray orbs.

"Meet again, my lady? Well, I shouldn't wonder if we did!"

Instinct seemed to warn him just then, and he turned swiftly toward the spot where Oliver Gilchrist had fallen in obedience to his leaden hint.

The craven rascal was cresting his head to look down and back, a hand on his pistol, an expression in his piggish eyes that told how gladly he would fire a death-shot, only for his lack of courage.

"You couldn't hit the side of a barn, Johnny, even if you were shut up inside," carelessly laughed the Grip-sack Sharp, as he leisurely climbed up the slope toward the cur whose brutal amusement he had cut short in such an uncereceremonious manner.

"Don't—don't shoot!" gasped the craven wretch, shrinkingly, groveling where he lay, just as a little whelp turns on its back to await the inspection of a more powerful canine.

"At carrion—no, thank you," contemptuously retorted Harper, dropping to an easy position on a convenient rock near the rascal.

"Then—I can go?" doubtfully asked Gilchrist, venturing to assume a sitting posture.

"When the proper time comes—of course," slightly nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, supporting an elbow in one palm while thumb and forefinger thoughtfully caressed his massive chin.

"I didn't do anything to— What's that fool girl to you, anyhow?"

"She's a woman, and my mother belonged to the same sex, Johnny."

"I never meant to— Her father said I might win her if I could," sulkily muttered the ruffian, gradually gathering something of his usual impudence—it could hardly be termed courage.

"And you follow the red-skin precept: heap licking, plenty like?"

"I didn't hurt her. I only wanted—"

"Heap less than you got, I'm open to bet, Johnny!" with a soft laugh, as he thrust out one substantially booted foot, working the toes suggestively. "Lots of virtue in good leather, and—"

"I'll get even, some day!" viciously snarled the cur, showing his teeth as a hot flush of mingled shame and anger crept into his face.

"What's the matter with to-day, Johnny?" smiled Harper, wickedly. "You'll never get closer to yours truly, nor ever find me in a more accommodating mood than right here and right now. Shall the music strike up, Johnny?"

"I don't—I meant the girl," stammered the rascal, cowering before that dangerous smile.

"Is that so? And I couldn't persuade you to play I was the girl?" anxiously persisted the Grip-sack Sharp. "All right, then; let's talk about something else. Say—about the Seraphs of Sodom, for instance. I think I heard you mention them a bit ago."

CHAPTER IV.

PURSUIT OF INFORMATION.

GILCHRIST gave a great start at that unexpected question, and his florid face turned pale until it fairly resembled poorly worked putty as he stammered:

"What do you—you heard—"

"Just enough to want to hear more," nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, covertly yet closely watching the face of the rascal. "I think you mentioned something of the sort while sparking—do you call it that—Miss Inza Laxton?"

Such was the fact, as the reader may recall. And the allusion came just in time to check the rush which Sidney Harper was on the point of making in defense of persecuted beauty, and possibly that same allusion saved Oliver Gilchrist broken bones, if not life itself.

It will be remembered that, thinking himself made a target for some bloodthirsty foe, the Grip-sack Sharp had speedily sought cover behind a convenient boulder, peering through the vine-wreathed bushes in quest of his enemy, in order to return the compliment. Instead, he saw Inza Laxton, and before long jumped to the right conclusion: that she had shot at the grouse instead of at him, the bullet glancing from the tree, to bury itself in the grip-sack suspended at his left hip.

He would have interfered in her behalf when the wild-cat disputed her possession of the grouse, if time had been granted him. But, that episode was over almost ere it begun, and then something far more powerful than curiosity held him back, even when Gilchrist came upon the stage of action.

Stern, deadly business had called him to that section, and a subtle instinct warned him that this fair young huntress was destined to play an important part in the tragedy before him.

Still, when Oliver Gilchrist crossed the bounds of decency, Sidney Harper would have interfered, and was on the point of breaking cover, pistol in hand, when that allusion to the Seraphs of Sodom came from the lips of the rascal.

Eager to hear still more, Harper kept low until, in manhood, further inaction was impossible, when he "chipped in" after the fashion already detailed.

Gilchrist shivered visibly, shrinking back a bit further, clearly so ill at ease that he even meditated a desperate break-away rather than tell more of what he knew about that evil gang;

but the Grip-sack Sharp drew a revolver, carelessly lifting the hammer far enough to permit the shining cylinder to revolve easily as he ran it across his open palm.

"I did, but I didn't mean anything by it," stammered the craven rascal, too frightened even to lie plausibly. "I just wanted to frighten her. I don't know anything about them of course."

"You live in Sodom, I believe, Johnny?"

"Well—yes."

"How long have you made that delightfully-named burg your home?"

"A month—a year or so!" stammered the rascal.

"Not enough difference to quarrel over, Johnny," purred the Grip-sack Sharp. "You do live there, though?"

"Yes, I live there."

"And living in Sodom, you solemnly avow that you know nothing more concerning the Seraphs of that ilk than you have already told me—which is simply naught?"

Gilchrist fidgeted uneasily on his flinty seat, for somehow that smooth, bland tone frightened him even more than harsh notes.

"Well, of course I know about as much as the rest of the citizens; that there is such an organization," he admitted uneasily.

"Being Seraphs, of course they live religiously up to their title and flop industriously about this mundane sphere, doing good unto all?"

"I reckon you know," with a sulky snarl coming into his tones. "They're said to be road-agents."

"Only said to be?"

"Known to be, then, if you're so mighty particular."

"Johnny, one would almost think you belonged to the winged tribe, judging by your reluctance to speak evil of the outfit!" chuckled the Sharp. "Of course you don't, for it takes sand to hold up a hearse, but I say it looks that way."

Gilchrist showed his teeth, but ventured no reply. Lightly as this stranger spoke, blandly as he smiled, Oliver read him correctly so far; he was a dangerous customer to take chances against.

"You say you live in Sodom. You have made that place your residence for a month, or a year or two; trifles don't count, of course. And your name is—what?"

"Johnny—John Smith."

"Oliver Gilchrist, when read backward. And your father's name is Warren Gilchrist. You two make up the whole family, I believe?"

"If you know so much, why ask me?" snarled the rough, with poorly-concealed venom.

"Well, I always did like to hear a liar spread himself," laughed Harper, closing an eye and squinting down the dark barrel of his revolver for an instant.

How fervently Oliver Gilchrist wished that weapon would explode at that precise moment.

"If you know all that, I can't tell you any more. Do you mean to keep me here all night?"

"I always did like a liar, but you suit me too mighty well, Johnny Smith," nodded Harper, his smile vanishing and a stern look taking its place. "Now let's see if you have clean forgot how to tell the simple truth: that young lady's name?"

"You spoke it a bit ago: Inza Laxton."

"Miss Inza Laxton, Johnny. Don't try to be so familiar with your superiors. The young lady also makes her home in Sodom, of course?"

Again Gilchrist fidgeted nervously, casting a swift glance around as though mentally debating the chances for and against him in a desperate burst for liberty.

Not once did he think of measuring strength with the stranger. He was too thorough a cur for that.

"Take your time, Johnny Smith, if you are trying to twist your tongue around the truth, but think twice before spitting out a lie."

"She don't live in town, but up on the hills somewheres," came the hasty response.

"Truthful, if not exactly definite. Or is that the name of the Laxton palace: Somewheres?"

"Over yon' way," with a curt nod, his veiled eyes glowing with an evil light, which he dared not openly reveal. "I can't describe it so you could find the place, but almost anybody in Sodom can guide you there if such is your wish."

"Why should I wish it?"

"Well, you seemed to be mightily— The lady is more than good-looking," abruptly changing the shape of his sentence, through prudential motives.

"So is another lady, back toward the rising sun, Johnny Smith," with a low, soft laugh, as his strong face lit up with a genial smile, in which his present companion plainly held no part. "And that lady is decidedly against all mashing, on my part, at least."

"You are a married man, then?"

"These ten years and over, Johnny; but that don't touch you. I hardly think you're capable of comprehending the fact that a man can be content with the love of one woman, even if that man be a drummer."

"You hardly thought to run across a customer out in these wilds?" sneered Gilchrist, slowly gathering courage as time passed on without his receiving further punishment for his dastardly conduct. "Of course it couldn't be because you'd heard talk of a charming mountain girl living in this quarter!"

"What if I was looking for that famous gold mine?"

Oliver gave a start, and a sound that might have been a suppressed curse, escaped his lips.

"You mean—you don't mean—"

"Why not?" laughed the Grip-sack Sharp, mockingly. "I do, or I don't, one or the other, but never whisper as much to another person, Johnny Smith, on your precious life!"

Gilchrist showed his teeth at the mockery, but said nothing.

"This Pitt Laxton, who is popularly supposed to hold the secret of a mine of fabulous wealth: is he any relation to Miss Inza Laxton?" asked Harper, after a brief pause, his tones carelessness itself, though his keen gray eyes were closely reading every change and shifting of that ugly face before him.

"He's her father."

"That's why you're so hot on trapping the little lady, eh?"

"I've got as good a right to try as the next man, haven't I?"

"In a manly, respectable way, of course; but that's a notch above your caliber, Johnny Smith. You're all brute. Nature plainly intended you for a bull-dog, but when the finishing time came, she had run out of pluck, and had to fill you up with cur."

"She didn't forget to put in teeth, anyway!" snapped the cur.

"Nor the inclination to use them, provided you could do so in the dark, and from behind the back of your chosen victim—just so," with a nod of open contempt. "As a cur, you're a howling success, Johnny Smith, but when you aspire beyond that lowly station, you're 'way off your proper beat, and only make yourself a nuisance."

"I'm trying to talk a bit for your own good, Johnny Smith, and when I give you your good-night kick, you'd better hunt a corner where you can gnaw the bone in sober meditation."

"Don't try to repeat your attack on that young lady, or you may fare still worse the next time. Just now you're only uneasy while sitting down; another time, and you may find a leak sprung clear through your carcass."

Oliver Gilchrist gave a quick start, and his face flushed hotly. Though he felt him such an arrant cur, the Grip-sack Sharp held himself in readiness to repel an attack, thinking that his scornful words had at last stung the rascal into a semblance of pluck.

But Gilchrist resumed his former position, his eyes downcast, his thick lips trembling visibly before he spoke again:

"Maybe I've got a better show than you think. Maybe I'll be the pole to knock down the persimmon, after all!"

"By your supposed hold over Pitt Laxton, no doubt?" quietly asserted Harper. "I hardly think you'll ever try to win the daughter by pinching the parent."

"Why not? What is he to you?"

"His daughter's father, if nothing more," with a low, peculiar laugh that Gilchrist vainly strove to interpret aright. "I've this day earned the right to be considered her friend. That, of course, makes all her friends my friends, her enemies my enemies. And when you come to put the thumb-screws on Pitt Laxton, maybe I'll be there to set you up in his boots."

Oliver Gilchrist flashed an ugly look before him. Sidney Harper naturally took it to himself, but in sober truth the glance passed over his shoulder, intended for a far different person.

Stealing rapidly yet silently up the slope came several crouching figures, each one bearing a deadly weapon, each one watching that unsuspecting form above, ready to drill it through with lead at the first sign of discovery on his part.

This discovery it was that lent Oliver Gilchrist that spark of defiance, and this it was that, a few moments later, led him to roll swiftly over to elude a snap-shot as those desperadoes pounced in a body upon the Grip-sack Sharp, bearing him to the ground beneath them!

"Kill him! Kill him by inches!" howled the cur, venomously.

CHAPTER V.

A HUMAN BULL-DOG.

"The palace of a millionaire, but who'd think it?"

Warren Gilchrist came to a pause, his short, muscular arms behind his back, his head bent a little to one side, as he viewed the building before him through partially closed lids.

A cozy, comfortable enough looking cabin, but hardly what one might with propriety call a palace, even for that remote region: even in jest that title was too much of a burlesque.

The cabin was built of logs: in itself an unusual circumstance in a purely mining section,

where timber can be put to so much better use in shoring up the walls left behind by the human gophers.

It was constructed after the regular fashion, with dove-tailed corners, each log holding and being held by its immediate neighbors.

Some slight pretense had been made at squaring the timbers with the ax, before putting them into place, but the builder had been too hurried or not skillful enough to fit his joints beyond the necessity of employing the regulation "stick and daub" in order to make the building wind and weather proof.

At one end rose a great chimney, fairly well laid up with stones and mud mortar, but the ugliness of this, as well as the greater part of the cabin itself, was hidden under a leafy mass of native woodbine, climbing at its own sweet will.

This suit of green, dark and lustrous, made all the difference between ugliness and beauty, but Warren Gilchrist had eyes for naught of this; to him a cabin was a cabin, and the thought that in this small house dwelt a man who might be able to measure his gold in a bushel, if needs be, brought a curl of amused contempt to his thick lips.

"Too hin, Pitt Laxton!" with a grim nod of his peculiarly shaped head, as he slowly moved toward the cabin. "It might dupe the rabble, but not your Uncle Fuller!"

Suddenly his slouching figure straightened up, his blunt nostrils beginning to quiver, his little eyes to glow and burn as though backed by living fire. His thick lips curled back to give a glimpse of his strong teeth, the action rendering him still more like his prototype, the bull-dog.

Just across the threshold he had caught sight of a human figure, bearing a rifle, the muzzle of which was turned in his direction.

"Never mind firing a salute, Laxton!" he called out, leaving his own weapons untouched, making no effort to protect himself from the deadly aim of the man who he knew longed and wished for his death. "You and I know each other too well to stand on ceremony."

By his actions in that emergency, Warren Gilchrist gave better evidence of bull-dog pluck than he could have shown by swift action and blustering threats. With that same slouching swagger he approached the door of the cabin, his broad chest, his bull-dog face, affording a target which even a novice could hardly have missed at that distance.

"I didn't know—there are so many rascals prowling about," muttered the man inside, as Gilchrist paused on the threshold, a hand resting against either side of the casing.

"One of whom you took me to be which, eh?" laughed Gilchrist, entering the cabin without waiting for an invitation, a grim smile curling back his thick lips. "Lucky you're not too quick with the trigger, old friend, else I might be out yonder, toes-up, for good-and-all. And then you'd just naturally pine away and die of pure grief!"

Click came his teeth together, his massive jaws squaring, a fold of leathery skin hanging down on each side of his jaws as his chin protruded, completing his marvelous resemblance to the animal with which he has been compared.

Pitt Laxton turned away to replace his rifle on the wooden hooks fastened to the logs above the great fireplace. He made no answer to that grimly facetious remark, but his bony hands trembled visibly as they rose above his head.

"Got the shivers again, pardner?" chuckled Gilchrist.

"You lie, curse you!" flashed the owner of the cabin, turning upon his unwelcome guest. "I've quit drinking, and you know it!"

"Softly—dip lightly, Pitt Laxton! I'm both hungry and dry, but a morsel like that makes mighty tough swallowing, even though it comes from the hand of a friend."

"Friend?" echoed Laxton, with a harsh, forced laugh that expressed far more of agony than of mirth.

"Whose fault, else? Haven't I been offering the grip of good-fellowship these long weeks past? All it lacks is one little word from your lips, one grip from your hand, and then we can face the world and back it down without half-trying!"

Pitt Laxton sunk into a chair opposite the human bull-dog, with an effort recovering at least a portion of his wonted composure.

The contrast was a strong one. Two men could hardly have differed more widely in personal appearance.

Pitt Laxton was tall and rather slenderly built, this fact being emphasized by his lack of superfluous flesh, verging upon emaciation.

Where Gilchrist was florid, Laxton was so pale as to seem cadaverous. Where one was crowned by foxy, once red hair, the other was iron-gray, originally jetty black. Where Gilchrist wore short, bristling whiskers on each upper jaw, leaving the rest of his bull-dog face bare, Laxton wore a full beard, thinly streaked with silver, yet still so intensely black as to emphasize his unhealthy pallor.

Pitt Laxton might once have been called a handsome man, for his features were clear-cut and regular, but now his face bore something

like a hunted look; the expression of a man who feels that all about him lie traps and pitfalls, into one or another of which he is doomed to stumble sooner or later.

"What brought you here to-day?" asked Laxton, trying to steady his voice and cover the fierce hatred which he dared not openly betray.

"Call it the same old business, Laxton, and you'll not miss the bull's eye very far. Your charming daughter?"

"Is out with her rifle."

"The dear little amazon! Hope she'll not make a mistake and knock over my hopeful for a bird of paradise!" chuckled Gilchrist, little dreaming how close to the truth he was coming, though in clumsy jest.

Laxton frowned, shifting uneasily on his seat. If he had no other redeeming trait, he loved this bright-eyed daughter of his, and knowing how thoroughly she detested the cur who sought her hand in wedlock, it gave him angry pain to think that she might even then be subjected to his loathed solicitations.

"Don't fidget, Laxton," nodded Gilchrist, baring his teeth as he read something of the truth. "What if they do come together? Better Noll than Fred Benight—eh?"

Something betwixt a groan and a curse grated through the other's teeth, and his face turned paler than ever at the mention of that name.

Warren Gilchrist grew earnest, bending forward, hands on knees and eyes steadily glowing as he spoke again:

"You don't like the fellow. Ditto here. You don't want him to mate with Inza, and neither do I. So—what's the matter with Noll?"

"She—Inza don't like him."

"She's young and foolish and don't really know her own mind. You are old enough to teach her better. The only question is—will you do it?"

"I can't force the child," muttered Laxton, uneasily.

"For can't, read won't. Is that it, Laxton?"

A hectic flush shot into the haggard face of his opposite, and with tightly-clinched hands, Laxton seemed on the point of leaping at the throat of the ruffian who persisted in driving him into a corner.

"Spell it that way if you like, Warren Gilchrist!" he harshly uttered. "If she loved him, I wouldn't lay a straw in their path, but—"

"She loves Fred Benight. Will you lay a straw in their path?"

It seemed a simple question, mildly put, yet it exerted a strange effect over the owner of that cabin. With a swift catching of his breath he sprung to his feet, crossing the room and leaning with his head against the plain mantel over the fireplace.

His gaunt figure shivered as though an ague chill had suddenly attacked him, and his breathing seemed labored and painful.

Warren Gilchrist watched him in silence, his lips curling back, his chin protruding, his jaws hanging lower than ever. A true bull-dog he seemed just then.

For a few moments neither spoke, but then Gilchrist added:

"Because it comes to just that: Fred Benight or Oliver Gilchrist. Inza is quite old enough to be married. She knows this as well, or better than you do. She's done a sight of thinking that way of late. And if you let her have rope, she'll make you the father-in-law of Fred Benight before the new moon comes!"

"I'd sooner dress her for the grave!" impulsively cried Laxton, turning, his face fairly convulsed with strong emotion.

"Don't forget the other alternative, pardner," with a low chuckle. "Noll stands ready to take the little beauty, without questioning the past of her worthy parent, or—"

"Curse your insinuations!" flashed Laxton, angrily. "What do you mean by that?"

"Business, pure and simple, old fellow," was the cool retort. "Don't ruffle up at me, or instead of barely touching an old sore, I may rub it in thorough earnest."

"I don't know what you're driving at."

"Then don't kick without cause. But I said business, and business goes from now on," grimly nodded Gilchrist. "My boy wants your girl. He'll do the talking so far as she's concerned, but I'll try to argue you into the proper mood. Can he have her?"

"If she likes. For me, I'll never use word or action to force her inclinations. Now do your level worst, Warren Gilchrist!"

"I wonder if you can even begin to suspect what that same worst may consist of?" drawled Gilchrist, watching his adversary through his nearly closed lids. "I wonder if you can even begin to count up my power?"

"I know that you're a devil in human shape!" flashed Laxton, hotly. "I know that you'd wade through innocent blood to your knees in order to win a coveted prize! I know that you have ruffians at your back to whom your slightest gesture is a command!"

"How mighty wise!" sneered Gilchrist, his little eyes glowing vividly. "And knowing all this, you still defy me?"

Pitt Laxton sunk back in his seat, shivering visibly. His brief fire seemed to die away, and

once more he appeared to fall under the strange influence wielded by this human bull-dog.

"Lucky for me that no unfriendly ears are near," grimly laughed Gilchrist, casting a quick glance out through the open doorway, "else their owners might ask who and what are these doughty ruffians of whom you talk so glibly. They might even venture so far as to wonder whether or no you could be making allusions to the Seraphs of Sodom!"

"Would they be so mighty far out of the way?" flashed Laxton.

Gilchrist bent forward, his eyes opened widely enough now, his massive jaws squared and his lips curling back. For a moment or two that duel of eyes lasted. Then the black orbs lowered, uneasily, and Gilchrist laughed with a sneering cadence.

"If you really reckon I'm the head of that precious outfit, Pitt Laxton, then you're a bigger idiot than even I thought you! Why, man, I'd have an argument to back me up that even you wouldn't dare fly in the face of. I'd simply say:

"Give my lad your girl to wive, or I'll set the Seraphs on your track, with orders to spare not!"

So naturally was this spoken, that Pitt Laxton evidently took it for sober earnest, since he sprung from his seat with a harsh cry, drawing a revolver and leveling it as he uttered:

"Now I have got you! Surrender, or I'll blow you through! I always thought you the head of that vile gang, and now I know it!"

CHAPTER VI.

UNDER THE BULLDOG'S PAWS.

AN almost satanic fire filled those sunken eyes, changing black to dusky red, and Warren Gilchrist seemed wholly at the mercy of the desperate man whom he had so mercilessly baited of late.

But his bulldog grit was never more perfectly exemplified than in the present emergency.

He never flinched in the least, though he must have seen how gladly Laxton would jump at a chance of breaking his bonds forever.

He even laughed, soft and easily, as he returned that mad glare.

"Yield, Captain Arch-angel!" fiercely added Pitt Laxton, his weapon staring the other fairly in the face. "Lift a finger in resistance, and I'll scatter your brains all over the floor!"

"Steady, Carl Bassett!" sharply cried Warren Gilchrist, at the same instant ducking his head low, like one who anticipates a snap-shot.

It came, but it was purely involuntary. Pitt Laxton gave a strange, choking cry as that name rung in his ears, staggering as from a heavy blow, his arm slightly lifting as his finger twitched involuntarily.

The hammer fell, the weapon exploded, but the lead passed harmlessly over the head of his target, spending its force on the rocks far away on the opposite slope.

With a growl like that of the animal he so closely resembled in face, Warren Gilchrist left his seat and plunged head-first upon the owner of the cabin. With hardly an effort to defend himself, Pitt Laxton went down before that impetuous onset, and as his frame struck the floor, Gilchrist had him by the throat with both hands, one knee pinning the armed hand to the floor.

"Show your tusks at me, would ye?" growled the human beast, his strong teeth clashing together, his red eyes glaring into the purpling face of his victim as those muscular fingers grew nearer and nearer together. "Run me in, eh? Drink yourself blind on the blood-money won by capturing Captain Arch-angel? Bah! you poor fool!" with a short, harsh laugh as he removed his right hand, to flash forth an ugly blade, sweeping it across the face of his victim, so close that the keen point fairly brushed the quivering eyelashes.

An inarticulate sound forced itself through that contracted passage, and the human bull-dog laughed afresh.

"Beg, would ye? All your short-lived pluck gone, is it? You'd pray for mercy at the hands of the gentleman you tried to butcher but a moment ago? And if I spare you, how long would your gratitude last? Any longer than it'd take to catch the drop again, think?"

Once more that vicious blade swept before those starting eyeballs, as though eager to split them in twain and cast them into utter darkness, but, as before, the hand of its owner was too steady to do more than emphasize his mockery.

Warren Gilchrist laughed maliciously as he removed his left hand from the bruised throat, spreading his broad palm over the helpless man's forehead, holding his head motionless as he swiftly circled his knife around the exposed neck, saying:

"I'll give you a token of remembrance, Pitt Laxton! Whenever you begin to forget this little lesson, just take a look in the glass!"

With a steadiness that was remarkable under the circumstances, Gilchrist swept his blade around, its keen point barely separating the skin enough to let a line of blood follow the motion, without inflicting a serious injury.

This done, he drew back and rose to his feet,

taking with him the revolver used by his adversary, casting it far away through the open door of the cabin.

"Get up and shake yourself, pardner," he chuckled, resuming his seat as before, cool and unflushed, showing not the slightest effect of that brief but vigorous action.

With a series of gasps, Pitt Laxton lifted his head from the floor with which it had come into such violent contact. He seemed to be suffering from something more than the shock of his fall, heavy though that had been; something more than his choking, though that had turned his pale face purple and almost driven his eyes from their sockets.

"Shall I assist you, Carl—Pitt Laxton?" mocked Gilchrist, but making no such move, his thick lips curling back in brutish glee, as he saw how that broken name caused his adversary to shiver. "Get up, man! Suppose Inza should happen back? She'd be ready to swear you'd sucked the black bottle too long and too steadily for the good of your health—yes she would, now!"

With a choking groan Laxton struggled to his feet, staggering across the room, followed by a warning:

"Never mind the gun, pardner! I'll agree to burn all the powder—dry, eh?"

Laxton dipped up a cup of water and swallowed it like one who has long fasted. He refilled the cup, pouring the water into his hollowed palm, bathing his throbbing brow repeatedly, all the time closely watched by the human bull-dog.

"Hit him heap harder than I thought, but so much the better!" mentally decided the pitiless taskmaster.

With his eyes cleared, his brain less confused, Pitt Laxton dropped the cup and forced himself to confront his master—for such he at last was forced to admit Gilchrist was.

"Are you through playing the idiot, Laxton, or must I read you yet another lesson?" coldly demanded Gilchrist.

"It's your put; I'm only looking on," huskily responded the other, as he sunk heavily into the chair which he righted again.

"Not quite so thirsty for head-money, then?"

"I'd take you if I could. I can't, and that settles it," was the slow reply, uttered in a tone so listless, so curious, that it startled the man who listened.

He shifted a little on his seat, casting a rapid glance over a shoulder through the open door, like one who more than half expects an attack from the rear. And so strongly was he impressed by this fancy, that he moved his seat until he could command a fair view without, while still barring the way to his cornered victim.

"Lucky you can't, for such a sensitive cuss as you are would suffer torments when the truth came out; that you'd make a water-haul instead of such a glorious strike!" laughed Gilchrist, sneeringly. "I'd find it only too easy to prove my innocence, but you—when put upon oath, could you swear that your rightful name is Pitt Laxton?"

With thinly veiled eagerness the speaker watched the effect of this speech, but he was plainly disappointed. Laxton gave a slight start, but that was all. His face did not change. It could not have turned paler, though, for it already bore the hue of a corpse.

"And you—have you always passed by the name of Warren Gilchrist?" asked Laxton, listlessly.

"I've never been called Carl Bassett, at any rate!" flashed the other, viciously. "Dare you say the same?"

"What use, if you want to think me that person?" still in that curiously even, subdued tone.

"Not the slightest, and there you're right!" nodded Gilchrist, his teeth showing viciously. "Shall I tell you what you did while known to the world as Carl Bassett?"

"Suit yourself. It's immaterial to me."

"You play it well, but it won't wash. You was Carl Bassett, once, no matter what you call yourself now. You had good excuse for changing your name, but the man remains the same. Suppose I should take up your idea of man-hunting? Suppose I were to place you under arrest and take you back to Baltimore?"

Pitt Laxton shivered at that, but it might have been from the effects of his recent fall and throttling, though Gilchrist decided differently. And then he thrust his venomous blade still deeper.

"Suppose I were to wait for Inza to return, and then tell her the story of Carl Bassett and his past? Ha! ha! ha!" laughing with grim triumph as Pitt Laxton shrunk back, moaning in his agony. "That penetrates your thick hide, does it?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Laxton, recovering himself by a desperate effort. "I felt—my brain is sick, from that choking!"

"Think how much longer it takes the sheriff to complete his work, Carl Bassett. A tiny pinch like that—bah! It's the choking in store, not the choking that's past. Or—is it because I spoke of telling the charming Inza?"

"Leave her alone—deal with me," said Lax-

ton, once more in that curiously subdued tone of voice. "What do you want?"

"Indirectly, a share of that marvelous bonanza of yours, partner."

"I have nothing of the kind. I'm a poor man. It takes all I can make to keep the hungry wolf from our door."

"You're not too weak from hunger to lie most vigorously, at all events, Pitt Laxton," nodded Gilchrist. "But let that part of the bargain rest for the present. We'll come back to it in the future."

"It's not so much what I want, as what my hopeful son is pining for lack of, neighbor, and that's a young and adorable bride. Her first name is Inza, and most people think her last is Laxton."

"If she will not accept him, what can I do?"

"Persuade her that she don't know what's best for her, of course," was the prompt reply. "Tell her that she can't have Fred Benight, for there's an obstacle in the path which is insurmountable. There is one such, I believe, Carl Bassett?"

Laxton shivered, his dull eyes drooping, but he spoke no word.

"Silence says yes, of course," chuckled Gilchrist. "That disposes of Master Benight and his pretensions. If not—if the hot-headed rascal tries to kick up a bobby, encouraged by whatever favor the fair Inza may have shown him in the past—I'll set the Seraphs on his track, if no milder means will suffice. And once fairly beneath the shadow of their wings, I'll go big bail he'll never bother mortal body again!"

At this half-admission, Pitt Laxton pricked up his ears, and Warren Gilchrist broke into a mocking laugh.

"Another slip on my part, think you, neighbor? Not a bit of it, old fellow, for I can say to Carl Bassett what I might hesitate to confide to the ears of honest Pitt Laxton. You're dead right; I'm the worthy rascal known throughout this section as Captain Arch-angel!"

Coolly, with hardly a touch of emphasis, the human bull-dog made this dangerous admission, and in no other way could he have shown how utterly he held that listener under his paws.

Captain Arch-angel!

The author of numberless crimes and bold outrages! The man for whose capture, dead or alive, a modest fortune was offered! The merciless wretch whom all honest men were advised to kill without compunction as soon as fairly sighted!

"If you could only rake me in, pardner, you'd have another bonanza, wouldn't you?" mocked the self-confessed outlaw, as he pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. "Mentally kicking yourself for not shooting before chinning, a bit ago, eh? Well, I always took you for a fool!"

"Why do you make this confession, Warren Gilchrist?" asked Pitt Laxton, still in that strangely subdued tone.

"That you may begin to realize how completely I hold you in my grip. That you may see how sure I am that, being Carl Bassett, you dare not make use of the information. And—yet more than that," he added as he stepped forward to shake a forefinger in the pale face of his victim.

"To prove to you how helpless you are, when I bid you force Inza into consenting to marry my son. For if you refuse, I'll set the Seraphs on your track, to make you suffer a thousand deaths!"

Just as that fierce threat passed his lips, the sharp crack of a rifle stung through the hills, and Warren Gilchrist uttered a muffled cry of angry pain as he shook his right hand savagely.

The tip, nail and all, had vanished with that shot!

CHAPTER VII.

MATCHING ONE LIE WITH ANOTHER.

NOT the slightest sound came to warn the Grip-sack Sharp of impending peril, and it was not until the deadly assault was actually made that he even dimly realized what was meant by that altered expression to be read on the face of the arrant cur whom he had cornered.

Mortal man was never more completely taken by surprise, and with half a dozen muscular hands gripping at his throat and hammering his limbs, he fell forward upon his face, with weight enough upon his back to nearly crush the life out of his body.

But then that mound of human flesh grew wildly agitated, with here and there a booted foot flying up on the loose, and presently one of the assailants shot off at a tangent, striking against the legs of the dancing, howling cur, destroying his balance, and adding so much more to that confused mass of struggling humanity.

Once the Grip-sack Sharp managed to rise to his knees, hurling an adversary a dozen feet away, only to go down again as the others put forth a reserve of power.

It was a desperate, almost terrific struggle while it lasted, but in the nature of things the

end had to come right speedily, and one by one those tangled members disengaged themselves from the mass.

"Kill him! Butcher him by inches, my bul-lies!" howled Oliver Gilchrist, once more on his feet, and safely beyond the heat of battle. "Oh, you sneering whelp o' perdition! won't I sock it to you now!"

There was no response made to this viciously triumphant speech.

Sidney Harper lacked the breath necessary, and neither of the three ruffians who had come to his rescue seemed to think it worth while.

"Holy smoke!" panted one of their number, twisting his neck aside, so as to brush his forehead against one shoulder. "But he's a tough nut to crack!"

"He's all ready for the hammer anyway," panted another, drawing back as he finished tying the final knot.

"Sure he's tight—look out!"

Oliver Gilchrist came forward with cowardly triumph mingling with the doubt and fear on his ugly face, only to start back with blanching face as a sudden motion came from the Grip-sack Sharp.

With an effort, remarkable coming after such a killing fight against heavy odds, Sidney Harper sat up, despite the bonds which had been applied to his feet as well as his hands, the latter twisted harshly behind his back.

He cast one contemptuous look after the recoiling coward, then turned his gaze upon his captors, summing up each one as well as he could through the blood that trickled through his eyebrows from a pair of superficial cuts above his forehead.

Imperfect though his vision consequently was, the Sample Sport saw enough to feel decidedly sure that he had not fallen into the grip of angels of mercy, to say the least.

"Give that yelping cur a kick for me, or clap a muzzle on him, won't you?" he coolly said, with a side nod toward Gilchrist. "He makes me too awful tired."

"Yah-ah!" snarled Oliver, springing forward and aiming a blow at the face of the defenseless man. "Your time's run out and now—"

"Dip lightly, please!" cried one of the trio, catching his arm and arresting the cowardly stroke with a vigor that caused Gilchrist to reel and stumble as he was whirled aside. "I reckon we'll hear what's bobbing before you exterminate the fellow, boss."

"Tell him I've got one finger free, and be sure he'll never crawl within range," scornfully cried the prisoner.

"Curse you, Dry-throat Johnny!" howled Gilchrist, seemingly fairly beside himself with rage at having his curish revenge foiled for the moment. "I'll even up with you for that!"

"Where's the old man?" laughed the one thus addressed. "Without him to back you, you wouldn't fight a sick kitten, and nobody knows that better than you do."

"Haven't I the right—"

"As long as you don't try to exercise it too mighty brash, yes."

"If you knew who that devil really is, you'd be only too glad to have him exterminated, lads," said Gilchrist, smothering his furious rage as best he could, and even throwing a coaxing sound into his notes as he came nearer. "It's the biggest and best piece of work the gang has—"

"Cheese it, you booby!" gratingly interrupted one of the others, with an ugly flash of warning toward the prisoner.

"Don't take the trouble, pardner," lightly chipped in the Grip-sack Sharp. "The booby has already let me into all your secrets."

"It's a lie!" howled Gilchrist, flushing and then turning pale as he flinched before those hot, menacing looks. "He knew it all from the start—he came here just for that purpose, and when I spotted him, I tried to jump him for the general good. I swear it, lads!"

"Which equals a lie, of course," nodded Harper.

"You button up, stranger," sharply muttered the fellow called Dry-throat Johnny, sweeping a huge foot past the face of the captive, so close that Harper almost felt the sole brush his lips.

"Button goes, since you ask it in such a gentlemanly fashion," the Grip-sack Sharp nodded, grimly.

"And you, Noll, take a squat and simmer a bit, until you can begin at the right end and reel off a plain, straight yarn. Never mind the quirks and quirkycues; we want the simple truth as near as your tongue can manage it. Eh, Fire-top? Isn't that the cheese, Calipers?"

Those two worthies nodded a grim assent, and despite his precarious situation, Sidney Harper could not help smiling faintly.

Evidently Oliver Gilchrist was hardly up to par in the estimation of these allies, and satisfied by the manner in which they treated him that his fate would be decided by the others, Harper began taking such notes as lay in his power.

Dry-throat Johnny, who appeared to take the lead by mutual consent, was a man of middle age, considerably above the average height, and built on a massive pattern, with a deep, heavy

voice that matched well with his portly presence.

He was fairly well dressed, even to linen collar and silk necktie, and found in a more civilized quarter, might easily have been taken for a reputable physician, who was a lover of good food and better drink.

"Fire-top Finney" was built on a smaller scale, but active and muscular as a wild-cat. His close cropped hair was fiery red, as were his mustaches, the latter curving below his square chin, to turn upward again with a ferocious twist to each end.

His garb was that of a free-and-easy sport, his long fingers showing half a dozen sparkling rings, while a brilliant ornamented his scarf, and a cluster pin shone in his linen. A heavy cable-chain hung around his neck, the ends disappearing in his fob.

"Calipers" was far less reputable in looks and dress, while his nick-name seemed ludicrously appropriate when one noticed—as one was forced to note—his tremendously bowed legs. From crotch to soles, they formed an almost perfect circle, and he could have held an empty barrel between his legs without the slightest muscular strain on his part.

He wore a stained, discolored red flannel shirt, with sleeves rolled above the elbow on each hairy arm. A rough strap held his canvas trousers about his middle, the lower ends vanishing inside wide-topped cowhide boots, the toes of which were gaping widely.

Each one of the trio bore a belt of arms, and each one had the air of men who both knew how and were ever ready to make use of the warlike tools.

"Different breed from that cur—worse luck me!" mentally summed up the prisoner. "And yet, I'm not so sure. They're fighters, and such men can't be all bad!"

"Tell it straight? Of course I will," cried Gilchrist, with fussy indignation. "Ain't I as deep in the mud as you're in the mire? And when I declare that he's a bloody detective, out here for the express purpose of hunting down—"

"Say it again, and say it slower, please," sharply interposed Dry-throat Johnny, and Harper caught a warning gesture, even though the back of the speaker was turned toward him.

Oliver Gilchrist laughed harshly, an evil look filling his putty-face as he shot a vicious glance toward the prisoner.

"Don't you worry, my lads. He'll never tell what he hears, if I have to pluck his tongue out by the roots with my own hand. Don't I tell you he's a detective, and—"

"What's that got to do with us?"

"Oh, curse your silly caution!" flashed Oliver, viciously. "I tell you he knows all about the gang. He's out here expressly to run down the Seraphs, and he jumped me from behind, just to pinch the truth out of me. Isn't that enough?"

The three roughs interchanged swift glances at this, and Calipers Tick growled forth:

"It didn't take so mighty tight pinchin', I don't reckon!"

"I never let out a yelp, even when he held his gun at my head and swore he'd blow me to kingdom-come if I refused to squeal!" boldly declared Gilchrist, drawing his form erect. "He said he'd insure me life and liberty and a rich reward if I'd tell him all the secrets of the gang, together with the names of the members; but I just laughed him to scorn. And if you hadn't come up as you did, he'd have butchered me, out of hand—devil grip him for a bloodhound!"

"A lie 'll never choke you, Johnny Smith!" grimly laughed the prisoner as his accuser paused to catch another breath. "Gentlemen, you've heard him peach, now let me chip in my mite.

"I caught that cur mistreating a lady, and knocked him down for so doing. Then, after the lady went her way, the cur began to whine for mercy at my hands. I didn't mean to hurt him, further than another dose of good leather, but—"

"Will you listen to his infernal lies?" savagely howled Gilchrist as he started toward the captive, only to be thrust back by the strong arm of Dry-throat Johnny.

"Keep your clothes on, boss, and you won't get sunburnt. There's a lie out somewheres, and we've got to nail it right where it belongs."

"That's white!" nodded Harper, grimly. "Turn about's fair play, and I couldn't stretch the truth wider than he has, if I thought fit to try, never so hard."

"Go on, and talk straight if you know what's good for you."

"Straight goes, gentlemen. And so—what does the pitiful cur do but offer to tell me all about the Seraphs and Sodom, from start to finish, if I'd only spare his miserable life.

"He said that he'd point out the way to their secret dens, and fix it so I could not only rope them in, all in a heap, but catch their boodle as well."

"It's a lie!" foamed Gilchrist, savagely.

"And when I pretended to humor him, just for pure sport, of course, gentlemen, what does he do but beg me to make double sure of three Seraphs whom he declared were too low-down

mean for hanging. He said that if I'd make sure of Dry-throat Johnny, Fire-top and Calipers, he'd be almost ready to pull hemp his own self!"

"Holy smoke!" gasped Gilchrist, fairly aghast at this assertion, yet giving it color by the way in which he shrank from those hot glances.

"You'll make oath to ail this?" slowly demanded Dry-throat Johnny. "You'll swear that he really spoke of those three men after that fashion, will you?"

The Grip-sack Sharp laughed softly, his eyes sparkling.

"Well, not this evening, gentlemen. You see, that cur came at me with a pack of foul lies, and I thought it only fit and proper to follow suit. You can take your choice: we've both lied from start to finish."

CHAPTER VIII.

CONDEMNED TO DEATH!

THE three thugs looked at each other, plainly bewildered and at a loss to fully understand the purpose of their captive in so acting.

"Yet it's just as simple as chewing soft-soap," laughed Harper, looking far more at ease than he really felt. "Gilchrist tried to lie me into the grave, and as the shortest method of showing you how utterly absurd his rigmorale really was, I matched his lie with another."

"Then you deny being a detective?"

"Of course I do, and if you'll free my hands for a bit, I'll show you my credentials; from the biggest, richest, most enterprising house that all the U. S. can boast of. I'm their prize runner, and what I say goes without discount. Take your order for anything, from a first-class city to a paper of pins. Small orders gratefully received, and big ones in due proportion. And when business is off the books, I'll drink with the driest throat in all the community—for The House pays my expenses, don't you see?"

Glibly, smoothly, naturally the Grip-sack Sharp rattled this off, and if he was other than what he claimed to be, then he must have studied his role with exceeding care beforehand.

"You talk mighty smooth, stranger," slowly said Fire-top, his keen blue eyes riveted on that strong face, trying to read what lay back of that careless, good-humored mask.

"Why not, since that's the way I make my bread and butter?" nodded Harper, briskly. "If I couldn't talk, where'd my jam and sugar and preserves come in to give the aforesaid b. and b. a relish?"

"Don't listen to him!" flashed Gilchrist, who had until now managed to hold his angry passions in partial check. "If he's a drummer, what is he doing out in these hills? If not a detective, why did he sneak up behind me and lay me cold?"

"Because I didn't, gentlemen," quietly interposed the prisoner, quick to see the one weak point in his defense, but hoping to smooth it over by a free use of his tongue. "Possibly some of you may be acquainted with a young lady called Miss Laxton?"

Gilchrist uttered a howl of rage and would have assaulted the bound man, only for the interposition of Dry-throat Johnny.

"Simmer, Noll, or I'll lay you down for a warm seat," he grimly threatened. "You've had your say, and now we'll hear his. After that—well, time enough."

"Time too much wasted, I'm thinkin'," surly growled Calipers Tick, scowling blackly. "We know the boy don't dare to peach, fer it'd stretch his neck with the lave o' us. So—chuck the stranger into the Soup-bowl and call it a day's work!"

"That's business!" cried Gilchrist, emboldened by this speech. "I swear to you that I've told the simple truth. He did offer me a big reward if I'd betray you all into his power!"

"How came I to suspect you of belonging to the Seraphs?" bluntly demanded Harper. "I wouldn't ask a better talker for my own side, but I'd rather sup sorrow with a short spoon than owe my life to such a wretched cur. As for you, gentlemen," with a short bow, "it's different. You're white. An honest man can accept a favor from such hands without lowering himself in his own estimation."

"Taffy on a rag!" sneered Calipers, who apparently had taken a strong dislike to the glib-tongued stranger.

"Still it remains gentlemen, even with you counted out, Billy Bowlegs," nodded Harper coolly. "Hold your breath to lighten your weight and lessen the strain on your underpinning, while I talk to your betters, will you?"

Such conduct seemed the height of folly, but the Sample Sport knew that he could not save himself by soft words, while blunt honesty might improve his prospects.

Calipers showed some anger, but as his mates laughed loudly at the bit, he contented himself with a subdued growl. Pinioned as he was, the Grip-sack Sharp would have preferred an open assault to that. It told him the bandy-legged ruffian felt sure of his revenge in good time, and so was content to wait a bit.

"I'm talking by the chalk-line, gentlemen," he added, showing nothing of his doubts in face or voice. "If I trip, Miss Laxton can set you

aright, and I'll pay the penalty for a crooked tongue.

"I caught that cur abusing her, and I chipped in, as you would have done had you been in my boots. I gave him a sound kicking. I made him beg her pardon on his knees. And then, when the lady went her way, I just kept the rascal for a time, to make sure he didn't follow her before she could get under the wing of her daddy."

"It's all a lie!" fumed Gilchrist. "Would I abuse the girl I've bound to be my wife? And what brought him so far from town if he's only a traveling drummer? Make him tell that."

"Just as easy. I was hunting for a gentleman named Pitt Laxton, who was once connected with the house I'm traveling for."

"He tried to make me tell him if such a man lived out here, but it was because he thought Laxton belonged to the gang," boldly lied Gilchrist. "Now you've heard us both, what're you going to do about it?"

"Even if he didn't know that you and I and each one of us belonged to the Seraphs of Sodom, he knows it now, and I dare you to turn him loose to spread that knowledge!"

With vicious audacity the rascal uttered this speech, drawing back beyond reach of an actual blow, laughing aloud as he saw his fellows interchange ugly glances.

"Don't be bulldozed by such a cur, gentlemen," quietly put in the Grip-sack Sharp, though none better than he could appreciate his peril after such a reckless speech. "I'll pledge you my word that I'll never make use of the knowledge that knave has flung at my head."

"Don't forget my father, lads, while you're weighing the matter. You'll have to answer to him, bear in mind."

"If he was the same caliber as his son, it wouldn't take long to jump just contrary," grimly muttered Dry-throat Johnny, who evidently was far from being in love with the younger Gilchrist. "As it is—you say, Fire-top!"

"It's croak, of course," nodded he of the red head. "The only question remaining is the how-to-do-it."

"That's easy enough," grinned Oliver, in high feather once more, now that he felt sure of his revenge on the man who had so deservedly punished him. "What's the matter with the drink, over yonder?"

Outwardly cool and unconcerned, Sidney Harper had watched and listened to all this, knowing right well that no words he could utter would avail him aught, after that last dastard stroke. And now, following the nod of the rascal, he recalled the rapid stream beside which he had lingered a few moments, shortly before catching the glancing lead from Inza Laxton's rifle.

Outwardly cool, inwardly he shuddered, as he recalled that ugly vision of the mad waters raging and seething in its rocky basin, before pitching down into the black hole beyond.

"It's good-night Sid!" he mentally exclaimed. "If I'd only found my game first!"

At a motion from Dry-throat Johnny, the three roughs drew a little apart, conversing together in subdued tones. Oliver Gilchrist did not venture to intrude upon their privacy, for he felt assured that all would come his way in good time.

He did not even approach his victim, much as he longed to torture him as a partial salve to his injured vanity, but impatiently awaited the decision of his subordinates.

This was not long delayed, and the three men drew nearer him, Dry-throat Johnny acting as spokesman, saying coldly:

"You demand the death of this man, sir?"

"For the good of the Family—I do," bowed Gilchrist.

"Very good. Your father, our chief, placed you in authority over us, and bade us obey you implicitly in his absence. Of course, we are ready to render that obedience, but in self-defense we ask if you are ready to assume all responsibility in case it should turn out that a mistake has been made?"

"You bet I just am!" flashed the young rascal.

"Very well. It's for you to pronounce his doom, for us to execute your orders, sir," bowed the outlaw, falling back a pace.

"Set his legs free, and march him down to Satan's Soup-bowl, then. Mind he don't give you the slip, for he's a desperate rascal," curtly uttered Gilchrist, turning away in the direction of the river.

"Hard lines, stranger, but you've got ears, and they've drank in a mighty sight too much for our good," grimly muttered Dry-throat Johnny, as he literally obeyed orders, cutting the thongs from about the ankles of the condemned man and lifting him to his feet.

"Harder lines to be lick-spittles to such a dirty whelp as that!" flashed Harper, his lips curling as he glanced after Gilchrist. "I took you for men. I humbly beg pardon of my race for making such a mistake!"

"Save your breath to say your prayers!" growled Dry-throat Johnny, plainly stung to the quick by that contemptuous tone.

Grip-sack Sid said no more. He knew that

only a miracle could save him from a hideous, if sudden death, but he was wise enough to know that such a miracle would receive no aid from these ruffians.

In grim silence he was marched along until he stood close to the edge of the perpendicular rock wall rising from the seething mass of waters, so close that he could distinctly see where, only a few rods below where they stood, the foaming element roaring loudly as it swept into the solid rock, through a barely visible cavity.

"Not much show for swimming, once in the drink, eh?" laughed Oliver Gilchrist, hugely enjoying the terrible feast in prospective. "If you have served Satan well he may carry you safely through the range, and spew you forth, a mile below; but he alone can do it."

Calipers Tick was unhooking the grip that still hung at the side of the condemned, avarice glowing in his bloodshot eyes, but Dry-throat Johnny rudely brushed his dirty paw aside.

"None o' that, pard, if you please. Let him take his belongings with him if he can."

"Fer why, I'd ax ye?" snarled the bowlegged ruffian.

"You saw Ginger Pete after he tumbled into the Soup-bowl and come out on the other side, didn't you?"

"Bet he did!" laughed Fire-top, maliciously, for all Sodom knew that Calipers had been caught robbing the dead man of his nuggets, which had remained safe in his pocket through all that terrible race.

"What matter?" coolly laughed Harper. "Let him steal. Reckon I'll have little use for such trifles after taking the trip."

"Trifles have hung a man before now," grimly nodded the ruffian. "You tumbled into the drink while admiring the prospect. You'll be found, if ever you pass through, with pockets where they should be. I'm right, boss?"

"Reckon you are," but speaking dubiously as he moved a little further from the escarpment. "But to carry out that scheme from start to finish, you've got to take those ropes off o' his arms."

"A touch o' the knife 'll do that, I reckon."

"Look out that he don't take you along with him, then," sharply added the coward, his face blanching at the bare thought.

"I'd take you, as a sop to Satan, if you dared come close enough," grimly uttered Grip-sack Sid, "but I've no special grudge against these poor devils. They're punished enough in having to serve such a dirty whelp as you have proved yourself!"

"As for you—I may go, but there's a better man coming to take my place, and I'm content to leave you to his gentle mercy."

"Now—grip him tight until I make the motion!" snarled Gilchrist, as the thongs were cut.

And then, creeping silently forward, he lifted a foot to plant it viciously against the back of the condemned, hurling him end over end to plunge sullenly into that foaming, swirling vortex.

CHAPTER IX.

GRANTED A RESPITE.

THAT roar was more of angry surprise than of pain, though the tip of his finger was shattered and the nail had vanished, torn away by that morsel of lead.

With a wild flourish of his mutilated hand, Warren Gilchrist drew a revolver, his heavy figure crouching like that of a beast about to make its leap, but then a wondering cry escaped his lips and he stood irresolute, staring through the open doorway.

"Steady, there!" came a ringing warning from the open air. "Don't force me to shoot at a more vital point than your finger, Mr. Gilchrist!"

Pitt Laxton had cowered before the menacing outlaw, knowing how powerless he was to resist or to resent. He had shrunk away at that rifle-crack, and shivered as a bit of bloody flesh left a red spot on his temple, but owing to his position he had, even sooner than Warren Gilchrist, discovered the whole truth, learned the author of that timely shot.

His brave, generous child!

If she had only sent that bullet straighter! If it had only bored a passage through that evil brain, instead!

Gilchrist saw Inza just closing her gun after inserting a fresh cartridge, and with those warning words she raised the pretty weapon and covered him with the sights.

"Then you really meant it, little spitfire?" he asked, showing his teeth a bit as he held up his bleeding hand.

"I just did!" with a sharp nod of her charming head. "I caught you threatening father—a sick and worn-out man! I nipped your finger to partly wipe out those threats, but—take warning! The next time I'll cut deeper than a finger, Mr. Gilchrist!"

While uttering these words, Inza drew closer to the threshold, lowering her rifle a bit, but still holding it convenient for quick use in case such action should be forced upon her by that dangerously-smiling ruffian.

Listening until Inza ceased of her own accord, Warren Gilchrist laughed in her face, shortly, contemptuously.

"Big words to come from such young and silly lips, baby, and they're hardly worth the breath it takes to acknowledge them. Gosuck sugar-plums and play with your dolls."

Turning from child to father, the self-confessed chief of the outlaw gang changed in face and tone, the one frowning, the other harsh and vicious, though so measured and even.

He raised his right hand and with a quick shake, spattered a drop or two of thick blood upon that pallid face, laughing harshly as he saw how Pitt Laxton shrunk and shivered at the contact.

"That's my brand, Pitt Laxton, and I'll defend my rights against all the wide world. By that brand I claim you as mine. By that brand I warn you to make ready against the hour when I'll come for your final decision!"

"The door is open, Mr. Gilchrist, and we prefer being alone," coldly cried Inza Laxton, her cheeks flushed, her dark eyes glowing as she saw how her father cowered before this human bulldog.

"I'll grant you a respite of forty-eight hours," steadily added Gilchrist, seemingly without having heard that pointed hint. "At the end of that time I'll come back to receive your answer. If favorable, all good and smooth sailing. If contrary—well, you know what it means when the judge puts on his black cap?"

"Father!" sharply cried Inza. "Tell him to go away. Why do you permit him to talk to you after such an insulting manner?"

"You can tell her just as much as you see fit, neighbor," laughed Gilchrist, again shaking the thickening gout of blood from his hand. "Paint me as a devil, yourself as an angel of light, if you prefer. I'll let your story hang together for that period of grace, at least, and as much longer as you will let it. Only—don't think of jumping bail, unless you want to precipitate matters."

A hard object dropped on his shoulder at that instant, and partly turning his head Warren Gilchrist almost ran his stubby nose against the muzzle of the little Stevens.

"I'll say the words if father won't, Mr. Gilchrist. Go! leave this house and never dare cross its threshold again until you can bring a spark of decency with you!"

Their gaze met above the leveled tube, and it would be hard to say which one had the best of the battle.

Warren Gilchrist showed true bull-dog grit, for no man knew better than he that it would take but a slight pressure of that little finger to sound his death-note. At such close quarters even that tiny bullet and pinch of powder would suffice.

"When beauty commands, chivalry obeys," he laughed, showing his strong teeth. "You say git, and I dust!"

He backed away from that menacing muzzle, pausing at the threshold with his burly figure almost shutting out the light of day, to add:

"When I do come, dear child, I'll bring Oliver and a priest with me, so make your arrangements, accordingly, please!"

Without pausing to note the effect of this parting shot, Gilchrist wheeled and strode rapidly away from the lone cabin.

Inza lowered the hammer of her rifle, placing the weapon in a corner, turning toward her father with a faint, choking sob.

Pitt Laxton dropped into a chair, but his trembling hands reached out, and Inza sprung forward, kneeling at his feet, her head bowed in his lap. Heavy sobs shook her lithe figure, and more than one bright drop fell upon her dark curls from those eyes above.

Gradually each one regained something like their wonted composure and strength, though Pitt Laxton showed by his haggard face and bloodshot eyes, how terribly he had suffered since their parting a few hours earlier in the day.

"You heard what he said—about his wretched son, father?" at length asked Inza, her dark eyes beginning to glow with indignation once more. "You heard him hint at marriage between me and his whelp?"

"Don't mind it, deary," brokenly muttered the settler, a trembling hand smoothing her glossy locks.

"But I do mind it, pappy, dear, and more than ever now that Oliver Gilchrist has shown himself in his true colors. Father, if the son had stood where his father stood, a bit ago, I'd be a murderess now!"

"Inza—little pet!"

"It's truth, pappy," drawing a long breath as she nestled still closer to him, her little hands seeking and imprisoning one of his. "If you see that wretch coming, tie my hands behind my back, or I'll never be able to resist temptation!"

"You—then you saw him to-day?" ventured Laxton.

"Saw him—heard him—felt him!" flashed Inza, her face flushing hotly at the memories thus revived. "And only for the coming of a perfect stranger—You should have seen how easily he handled that miserable cur, father!"

Pitt Laxton roused a little at this, for of all things he loved this bright, beautiful girl, and in her peril, past though it might be, he for the moment forgot that which still hung so darkly over his own head.

Inza told her story from beginning to end, doing Oliver Gilchrist but slight injustice while describing the part he played in the little drama, possibly because words could not well blacken his conduct.

She told all, then drew back a little, the better to enjoy the indignant outburst which she naturally expected from the parent who loved her so dearly. It came, but there was a lack of fire, a strange apathy that caused her dark eyes to open widely.

Then—she recalled the few words caught from the lips of Warren Gilchrist before she punished his insolence by nipping his finger as it quivered before the face of her father.

Could it be that there was more than insolence—that there was truth in those savage threats?

No! she did not—she would not think so! And yet—

"Father, what did Warren Gilchrist mean when he spoke of the judge putting on his black cap? That is only done when about to pronounce the death sentence? What—Daddy!" winding her arms about him as she rose higher on her knees. "Can't you trust me? Can't you trust your little girl with all the truth?"

Pitt Laxton pressed her tightly to his heart, partly through powerful emotion, but partly to hide his working countenance for a moment or until he could regain partial self-control.

"And you, Inza? Can't you trust your poor old daddy?"

"I can—I do! Against the whole world, father!" impulsively cried the maiden, bending back until their eyes could meet.

A deep, relieved sigh came up in the throat of the father as he read the truth in those brave, loving eyes. She would trust and believe in him, though a thousand Warren Gilchrights were to paint him blacker than Satan.

That knowledge revived his courage, and brought back a portion of his old-time nerve. After all, it was not too late even yet.

He gently removed those clinging arms, rising to his feet and crossing the room, gazing long and steadily through the open doorway.

It seemed but a natural precaution on his part, yet he had quite a different object in so acting.

Despite his faith in the love and trust of his child, he dared not tell her the whole truth, and it was to gain time for deciding just how much, or how little he should reveal, that he sought this respite.

"He has gone, father," softly uttered Inza at his shoulder, laughing nervously as she added: "I reckon he looks on this cabin as none too healthy for him, and is satisfied to get off with a lost finger-tip—and he might fare far worse another time, the brute!"

"He's all of that, and worse, little girl," said Pitt Laxton, turning away from the door, and thus casting his own face into the shadow while talking. "He's a bull-dog for holding his grip, and the poor devil who once falls into his power has little mercy to expect."

"But you are not in his power daddy?"

"He thinks I am, and I reckon he isn't so mighty far out—worse luck!" groaned the man, bitterly.

"Through no fault of yours, daddy, I'm sure of that," soothingly said the maiden, stealing an arm about his bowed figure with a caressing tenderness.

"But in his grip, all the same," his voice growing steadier as he felt still more certain of her perfect faith. "I led a rough life in my younger days, Inza, and now my head is catching frost, I've got to pay the penalty, I reckon."

"Rough, perhaps, but never tough, daddy. You never sinned that I know of. If you were to tell me contrary, I'd only laugh, for I'd know you were but testing my faith."

A warm hug repaid her for this brave speech, and a tinge of color crept into that haggard face above. There may have been a touch of shame in it, but there was a great relief as well.

"Thank you, little woman, though I looked for nothing less, knowing your true heart—your mother's heart and faith, Inza."

"Let the rest go, daddy," pulling his head down until her warm red lips could touch his. "With mutual love and mutual trust, what more can we ask? Forget that ugly villain, and hope with me that he may tumble down and break his evil neck before he gets to Sodom!"

"No, better have it over with, Inza," drawing a long breath, then hurriedly adding: "It's too long a story to enter fully into details, child, but long years ago a terrible crime was committed, and that malicious devil has ever since tried to mix me up with the deed. And, through no fault of mine, he has succeeded, until to-day he holds my life in his hand! Ay, by swearing falsely he could hang me for murder!"

"If I had only known!" panted Inza, her eyes ablaze.

"What do you mean, child?"
 "I'd have made his brain my mark instead of his finger!"

CHAPTER X.

SHARING THE GOLDEN SECRET.

IMPULSIVELY though those words were spoken, no one who could have seen her face just then would for a moment have doubted her perfect sincerity. And Pitt Laxton caught himself wishing that she might have known the truth just a little earlier!

"If you had—but the shot might have killed both ways!" drawing a long breath, the fire dying out in his sunken eyes. "Better as it is, little girl, for as long as he can hope to share my rich secret, his greed for gold will keep his tongue in bonds. If he died, others might spring up to push his vile plots. For he's too cunning a devil not to guard against every emergency."

"You are innocent. Why not dare him to do his worst, father?"

"Because he has drawn the toils too tightly! He told me enough to convince me of that, before you came. He's got me foul. He can hang me unless—Inza?"

"Yes, father?"

"Can you bear to run away from this place, never to return, leaving not the faintest clew behind us?"

"For your sake, father?"

"For my sake—yes! Say that you will—swear that you'll go without telling anybody, without dropping a word or a hint, either now or at any time in the future, by which that devil in human shape could possibly track us out! Swear this, child!"

Inza hesitated, turning pale as a corpse, an appealing light coming into her dark eyes as she met his passionate gaze.

"From—from everybody, daddy?"

"Yes—and above all from the one you're thinking of now!" the father flashed, with an ugly frown. "Above all from Fred Benight, for he's my blackest, bitterest enemy!"

"Father!"

"I tell you it's true, child," his tones lowering, his eyes sinking and his face growing moody. "You fancy he's all that's perfect, now, but the day'll come when you'll know him, as I know him: a foul-hearted traitor to the very core!"

"I can't believe that, father, but if you say I must—"

"Would you rather see me pull hemp for a crime I never committed? If so, tell Fred Benight where we go, and you'll see that very thing come to pass."

"When shall we go, father? I'm ready when you are," quietly said Inza, but in strangely subdued tones, her lips almost as white as her blanched cheeks.

Pitt Laxton caught her in his arms, kissing her passionately.

"You're thinking me hard and pitiless, Inza, but the time'll come when you'll thank me for keeping you from that rascal. Now—we'll go away this very night, but before that, I'll show you why I've clung to this lonely cabin instead of going down to the city to live."

"What shall I do first, father?"

"Nothing, until I make sure there are no rascals skulking 'round the place," was his reply as he took the rifle from its hooks above the fireplace, leaving the cabin and scouting warily around.

Not until he felt perfectly safe against espial did Pitt Laxton give over the search and return to the cabin, speaking to Inza:

"Put on your hat, child, and come with me."

"Are we to start right now, father? Are we to ride, or must we abandon the horses with all the rest?"

"We'll ride, of course, when we leave for good, but that won't be until we have darkness to cover our movements. What I meant was—little woman," entering the cabin after a quick glance around the place and lowering his voice like one who fears eavesdroppers. "Can't you guess what I mean to show you, first?"

"Oh! where you get your gold?" a faint glow of interested curiosity coming into her pale face for the instant.

Pitt Laxton nodded quickly, at the same time touching his lips with a finger of caution.

"Don't talk too plain, child. I don't think there's any one skulking nigh, but it's best to keep on the safe side. You know how mighty curious the Sodomites have been, ever since some crack-brained idiot started the rumor of my having struck a wonderful bonanza."

"Was it only a rumor, then?" listlessly asked the maiden, her mind clearly busied with far different thoughts, as he could plainly see.

With a frown Pitt Laxton stood his rifle in a corner, dropping into a chair like one who had abandoned a purpose. After all, it was just as well, he told himself, glancing out doors.

"We'll wait until it grows dusk, I reckon, child," he said. "You can be doing up such few things as you can't get along without, ready for the start. Only take what you absolutely must, for gold will buy plenty more, and there'll be no lack of that, be sure!"

In pale silence the maiden obeyed, and Pitt

Laxton grew more gloomy than ever as he watched her movements. He knew what had changed her so completely, but he never once relented.

"It's all for your own good, child!" he muttered below his breath. "It's tearing your poor heart wide open now, but you'd sooner die than marry Fred Benight if you knew the whole truth!"

As the dusk deepened, father and daughter, both armed, left the cabin together and passed away through the thick clustering rocks, Pitt Laxton keeping a wary lookout against possible spies the while.

Presently he came to a halt, gazing keenly, suspiciously around them, then muttering to Inza:

"Stay here and watch, child. If you see any one skulking 'round, give them a shot and I'll be with you in a jiffy."

In silence Inza took her station, rifle in hand, while Laxton crept under the mass of vine-clad bushes, laying his rifle aside the better to enable him to perform the task before him.

Slipping his hands beneath a flat slab of rock, he exerted his strength to turn it over, laying bare an irregular crevice in the rock beneath, while through the opening thus revealed came a puff of cool, damp air. Bending far over, he stretched out his arm and loosened a coil of rope from a narrow shelf of rock, permitting it to drop from his fingers, then rising up and returning to his daughter.

"See anything suspicious, little woman?" he whispered, softly.

"Nothing, father."

"Then I reckon we're all right. Come—I'll share my golden secret with you, little woman, and then if anything should happen to me, you'll still be well fixed."

"What should happen, father?"

"Well, I don't know," with an uneasy laugh that but thinly veiled his real emotions. "Somehow I'm feeling mighty blue. 'Pears like some person was walking over my grave!"

He bade Inza follow him, then crept under the leafy cover to the mouth of the cavern where his marvelous secret nestled.

"Don't move until I give you light, child!" he added, thrusting his feet into the crevice and rapidly vanishing from her anxious gaze.

Not for long. A faint spark of light showed far below, and as she gazed, Inza gradually saw more. Her father was standing on a level rock floor, lighting a candle, the rays of which revealed a rope ladder hanging from the opening down to his feet. And as his strong hand caught and steadied this, he bade her fear not and descend.

Inza promptly obeyed, curiosity rapidly getting the better of her recent grief, for though she had known for many months that her parent had made some sort of rich discovery, never until now had she been given even an idea as to its precise nature.

"Is this your secret mine, father?" she asked, clinging to his arm as she gazed around by that dim light, as best she could taking in her strange surroundings.

"It's the entrance to it," nodded Laxton, turning the light toward a rude sort of armory fashioned to one side, where pistols, rifles, kegs of powder and boxes of cartridges stood ready for use. "And here you see the means of defending it, in case any rascals should try to jump my claim. See!" another turn of the light showing a quantity of provisions such as would not be injured by dampness or mold. "If we had to do it, little woman, you and I could come here and live like princes!"

Lighting a second candle, which he put into her hand, Pitt Laxton led the way, passing down a slope and turning a sharp angle, pausing as a deep, sullen roaring grew more distinct.

"What is that, father? Surely—not the river?"

"Surely, yes," with a nod and short, grim laugh. "It's the bubbling and boiling of Satan's Soup bowl. Don't be frightend. I've spent many a long hour down here, and never yet caught so much as a glimpse of either hoof or horns."

Inza shivered, turning a bit paler at that rough jest, and clinging closer to his strong arm as they moved toward that ugly echo.

Louder and clearer it grew as they advanced, until the sound was such that only by lifting the voice very high could speech be rightly interpreted.

"Look!" cried Laxton, lifting his candle and casting its rays on a smooth beech of nearly white sand, beyond which the black waters sullenly circled, marked here and there by a little patch of foam. "I found my bonanza right here, little woman! For countless ages those waters have been gnawing nuggets and dust from the mountains, rolling it along to in time cast it up here. And when I first saw the spot, it seemed almost one solid bed of gold!"

"How did you make this discovery, daddy?"

"Through pure accident, through following a hare which I crippled one day. I'll tell you more about it when we have spare time. Enough for now that I've gathered a store of dust and beans and nuggets big enough to make

you rich for life, though you should live to see a full century!"

"It is not down here?" almost listlessly asked Inza.

"Not here, but nearer the entrance. I brought you to mark the spot so you'd know where to find it in case anything should happen to me."

"Nothing will happen—don't talk as though there could be such a thing, daddy!" with a shiver.

"Then—you do love the old man, Inza? Even after I've denied your love?" with a wistful glow in his sunken eyes.

"You know I love you, father," was her quiet reply; but she made no offer to give him the usual kiss, and Pitt Laxton turned away from the golden sands with a muffled sigh.

He was beginning to pay the penalty of an evil past, and it could hardly have taken a more bitter shape than this. He idolized his child, and to forfeit her love would be bitterer than death to him.

At any other time Inza would have quickly read his thoughts, and just as quickly have banished them with hugs and kisses; but now her faculties seemed strangely dulled. It was almost as though she had been forced to take some stupefying drug that held her brain under a sluggish spell.

Pitt Laxton led the way toward the entrance to that curious cavern, but paused when half way, turning to the right and entering a small chamber or recess, where he stuck his candle by a drop of its own matter to a point of rock.

Kneeling, he scraped away the dry sand, lifting up a slab of rock and laying bare a large number of skin sacks. Two of these he secured, then covered the remainder from sight, leaving all as before.

"This is all we'll need on our journey, little woman. Mark where the gold is hidden, for you may some day have to come after it without old daddy to assist you."

"Without daddy, gold would be worse than valueless to me, father."

Pitt Laxton gave her a kiss, laughing fondly the while, then led the way to the rope ladder and through the crevice after extinguishing the candles. He dropped the stone slab, covered it over with leaves and dirt as before, then crept under the bushes and stood erect.

CHAPTER XI.

A GUARD FOR THE TREASURE.

SEEMINGLY unmoved by the fierce despair which he left behind him, Warren Gilchrist walked away from the Laxton cabin, taking the footpath which led into the trail by means of which Sodom City was reached.

The closest observer could not have detected any change from his ordinary manner. He walked slouchingly, swaying slightly from side to side, even in his gait resembling that animal to which he has so often been compared.

Although he must have known that Pitt Laxton, if indeed the Carl Bassett of old, would be willing to give his good right hand for a fair chance to kill him, Gilchrist never deigned to cast a single glance behind him, and but for one thing he might have been said to have forgotten that he had left armed enemies in his rear.

His wounded hand swung easily by his side, and though the splintered bone and lacerated flesh must have given him severe pain, he showed no signs of the fact.

In that one respect he overacted, but in naught else.

Not until he followed the path around the first curve, vanishing from sight of those in the cabin on the hill, did his assumed composure alter in the least. Then his wounded hand went up, shaking the thickened blood from it as a savage storm of oaths and curses fairly scorched through his lips.

"Marked for life by that infernal spitfire!" he snarled, clearing the finger-tip of blood by means of his lips, then viciously inspecting the extent of his injury. "My right hand—my pen finger, too!"

That thought seemed to increase his savage anger, and for a few moments he did nothing but curse and growl and champ his strong teeth together until his thick lips were fairly fringed with foam.

But then the blasphemous storm subsided as suddenly as it had broken forth, and drawing away from the trail a few paces, he used a pen-knife to trim the bruised flesh, then tore a strip from his handkerchief to bind up the hurt for the present.

"That spoils me for neat pen-work, I reckon," he growled, holding his hand up to lessen the rush of blood. "To you I owe it, my lady!" with a flashing glance in the direction of the lone cabin. "It's scored against you, and the day may come when you'll have bitter black cause for regretting your cursed handiness with that popgun. There's no alternative, now. You've got to come to Limerick, in person, for I'm not trusting another man so far—no, I'm not!"

He returned to the trail and pressed along it at a rapid pace, seemingly eager to reach his

present destination; but his brain worked still faster.

"The fool!" a short, subdued laugh of strong contempt accompanying the epithet. "How completely he gave himself away at the very first thrust! I had him foul, of course, but I counted on having a tough fight over every inch of ground. One of those flare-up, stick, start, runaway all in breath, fellows, after all, though his looks didn't show it. A rascal that will shoot or cut another, if he can do it on the jump, but never after a second thought.

"Shows how the human face will lie. I'd have made oath he was one of the sulky, brooding sort, all the more dangerous for each night's thought."

The discovery seemed to give Gilchrist more pleasure than chagrin, to judge from the grim smile that came into his bull-dog face as he strode along the winding trail.

"So much the better for all hands but himself! He's struck his blow, and had it parried. Now he'll sulk until—only for the girl!"

The thoughts of Inza seemed to give him the greatest annoyance. Perhaps that was natural, while his mutilated finger was throbbing so viciously. But it was something more than that.

"She's the best man of the two, and Noll wants to keep a stiff curb when he takes the saddle, or she'll throw him—too mighty high! Whip nor spur will touch her in the right place, and the lad hasn't much of an idea beyond such means. I'll have to school him a bit in advance, or his bridal bed'll have more thorns than roses in it!

"Time enough for that. Just now—will she let that cur wait at my bidding? Won't she coax the truth out of him—not the whole truth, of course, but about my threats? If so—dollars to cents the little witch'll make him take to his heels, hot-foot!"

It was this fear that sent Warren Gilchrist so rapidly over the crooked trail, for he wanted to guard against any attempt of that sort, and he did not know of any fit guards whom he could secure short of Sodom City.

"Hellow, dad, it's you, eh?" suddenly cried a coarse voice from a mass of rocks to the left of the trail, just as Warren Gilchrist was about to pass by the unsuspected ambushade.

"Noll!"

"Bet your sweet life, dad," chuckled that worthy, making his appearance, followed more leisurely by his comrades. "If we'd been rattlers, your heels would have been chuck-full of poison! How long since you took to sleep-walking?"

"What were you hiding for?"

"Call it just for fun, dad," with a subdued manner, as his little pig-eyes roved swiftly around them. "Maybe it's just as well no other person should know that we've been walking the hills to-day."

Warren Gilchrist gazed keenly into that unhealthy-looking face while its owner was speaking, and what he saw there caused him to turn abruptly toward the three men standing silently a little beyond.

"What's been doing, John McGee?"

"Obeying orders, so far as we three are concerned, chief," coldly responded Dry-throat Johnny, one hand rising to his brow in a salute.

"For the good of the Order," hastily put in Oliver. "To boil it all down, we've flavored the Old Boy's soup with fresh meat!"

The self-admitted chief of the Seraphs cast a quick glance around them, but seemed satisfied with the inspection. A more favorable point for a quiet talk could hardly have been picked out along the trail, and scenting important tidings, he made haste to get at the bottom facts.

"You've been up to something; what is it, Noll?"

"Defending the gang, to the best of my poor ability," bowed his son, knowing right well that, loving him as he did, Warren Gilchrist was ready to swallow almost any sort of tale, however preposterous less prejudiced listeners might brand it.

With glib speech he repeated much the same story as he had told the three Seraphs earlier in the day, though touching but lightly on the fact of his having been taken captive before the very eyes of his longed-for bride.

"He swore by Heaven and t'other place that he'd butcher me by inches if I didn't blow the whole business, but of course I couldn't even begin to see it that way, you know," with an off-hand carelessness that possibly imposed on his partial sire, but which could have deceived none other of his intimates.

He went on to relate how he held the blood-thirsty detective in play until the trio of Seraphs could come to his assistance, then briefly described what followed.

Warren Gilchrist listened in grim silence, his little eyes for the most part riveted on the face of his son, though taking occasional glances at the other men, as though even he could not altogether place confidence in the speaker. If he hoped to win confirmation or dissent from those faces, he spent his time in vain. Each man wore a mask that betrayed naught, even to his keen perception.

"It's an ugly job—and comes at a mighty

awkward moment, too!" he growled, moodily pinching his pendulous under-lip.

"What less could we do?" blustered Oliver. "I can swear the fellow was a detective, for his own lips convicted him. And of course he was on our track. It had to be done for the good of the Family!"

"Risky—mighty risky!" with another dubious growl. "You ought to have taken him to the den, to be punished or set free, as seemed best after I'd pumped him."

"It's too late for that, now, dad," chuckled Oliver, furtively rubbing his bruised person under cover. "He's soup, and past talking. You can bet big money he'll never trouble us again!"

"I'm thinking of others. Such devils are always kept track of by their bosses, and just now we can't afford to have questions asked."

"Who's to do the asking? And if they do come spying around, who's to say we know anything at all about the missing bloodhound?"

Warren Gilchrist frowned blackly as he looked at John McGee.

"You're the oldest, Johnny, and ought to bear the coolest head. Why didn't you look a little further ahead and—"

"I did protest, but your son flatly exerted his authority as our superior, and ordered us to carry out his wishes. If we had rebelled, would you have upheld us against him, captain?"

"No, I wouldn't," was the frank admission, his face clearing as he made it. "Never mind; it's past, and can't be recalled."

"And shouldn't be if it could!" bluntly declared Oliver. "That devil kicked—he swore he'd butcher me like a cur!"

Warren Gilchrist frowned a bit as he caught the half-smile that flashed across the faces of the Seraphs at this slip of the tongue, and he must have known that Oliver had by no means given a complete account of his adventure. But he let the matter rest for the present.

"After all, it's mighty lucky, lads. If I could have had one wish gratified by praying for it, 'twould have been for a meeting just like this, and right now!"

"Work on hand, captain?"

"Yes. You know that I've been keeping an eye on Pitt Laxton, for the good of the Family, of course."

"You haven't pinched him?" eagerly asked Oliver, his little eyes fairly glowing with greed. "You haven't made him own up to the secret mine?"

"Not precisely that," laughed Gilchrist, "but I'll get there with both feet, don't you worry. What I want just now is to have a couple of you keep a close watch over the cabin and its inmates to-night."

"Right or wrong, I've got a notion that the villain is plotting to do the Family out of their rights. I fancy he's meditating flight under cover of darkness, and this you have got to prevent at all hazards."

"Give us our orders, captain, and we'll carry them out," coldly uttered Dry-throat Johnny.

"Two men will be enough, both to watch and to check should the rascal really try to levant. Fire-top, you and Calipers can do the job. I reckon I can use Johnny to better advantage."

"Just how far are we to go, captain?" respectfully asked Finney. "If he should kick against stopping, what then?"

"I don't think he'll go that far," with a frown. "Just keep close watch over the cabin, and if you see any suspicious movements going on, show up and warn the rascal that it won't do; say I sent that message, and that you've got half a dozen stout lads to your back."

"But if he does kick, even after that?"

"Then down him, but don't rub him quite out unless you absolutely have to. Of course the girl must know of the bonanza, but she'd be harder to pinch than the old fellow, by odds."

"All right, captain," bowed Fire-top Finney. "Any further orders?"

"Nothing further, only to emphasize what I've already told you," was the response. "Lie low, and don't show your hand unless you are absolutely obliged to. Keep your eyes peeled, and don't lose sight of the place for an instant, unless the old rascal should try to leave. If he means flight, of course he'll take his horses. If he leaves the cabin without them, follow and note his every action, for he may try to pay a visit to his bonanza before taking to his heels."

"Then—if he saddles up, we're to block him, captain?"

"You are. He must be held on the place, if you have to fit him for the boneyard!" was the grim response.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BULL-DOG AND HIS WHELP.

A WAVE of his bandaged hand told Fire-top Finney and Calipers Tick that he had no further instructions to give them, and they turned away to carry out his bidding, when Oliver Gilchrist arrested them.

"Croak the old man, if you like, but mind how you handle the girl. She's private property, and you'll catch a heap row if she don't come to me safe and sound and bright as a new dollar!"

"Of course that's understood lads," hastily interposed the captain, as the two Seraphs looked toward him. "There's heap more than Laxton's secret mine at stake, and the girl's the key to it all."

"If the old man kicks so we have to salivate him, boss?"

Warren Gilchrist drooped his head, nervously pinching his thick lips for a breath before answering, but when he did speak it was positively enough.

"Don't hurt him if you can get around it, but if it must be that way, then take the girl on a horse—Laxton has a couple, you know—and carry her to the Den. One can do that, while the other brings me word at town."

"Very well, captain," nodded Finney, adding with a grim smile: "I will bear the message, and Tick can do the riding. He's built that way, you know!"

The bow-legged ruffian struck out at the joker, but took the slur in good part enough.

Again Warren Gilchrist motioned the pair away, and this time they were permitted to go without being checked.

With Oliver and Dry-throat Johnny bearing him company, Warren Gilchrist turned in the direction of Sodom City, covering a few rods before speaking again.

Then, as though his mind was fully made up, he turned to the big outlaw, saying:

"McGee, you know where Gypsy Joe and Policy Pete hold out?"

"They're at their claim, I reckon, captain."

"As I expected. Well, I want them in town, for unless I'm 'way off my base, there's plenty of work on hand for the gang."

"Shall I go look them up now, captain?"

"It's a shorter cut from here than by way of town—yes. Bring them with you and hang out at the same old place. If I need you to-night, I want to know where to look for you."

"I'll have them there long before midnight, captain," nodded the big fellow, abruptly turning from the trail and picking his way briskly through the scattered rocks.

Oliver Gilchrist was covertly watching the face of his parent all this time, his own showing a certain degree of uneasiness. He more than half suspected that McGee was sent off purely that Gilchrist might have a private talk with himself.

His suspicions were quickly confirmed, for as soon as the form of Dry-throat Johnny vanished from sight, Gilchrist turned upon his hopeful son with an ugly scowl and snarling notes:

"Been playing the infernal fool again, have you, Noll?"

"In bringing a dangerous enemy to the gang to his oats, dad?"

"That was a fool-trick enough, but I meant about the girl. You saw her out on the hills?"

"And felt her, too!" snapped Oliver, rubbing his lips as though he could still feel those indignant blows. "Never mind: I'll more than even up when I've got the collar on the frisky jade—bet I will!"

"If you ever do," sneered Gilchrist, looking his whelp over with curiously-mingled emotions.

He loved this whelp of his, and all the more because he had never felt anything of the sort toward another human being. He was ready to sacrifice anything for his benefit. He could make such allowances as only a doting father can make, but at the same time he was painfully awake to the defects in that loved one's character.

Oliver was wicked, but that was to be expected with such a parent, and Warren Gilchrist did not consider that as a defect; if the young man had been honest, true, faithful, perhaps he would not have been loved nearly so well.

But Oliver was a coward to the very core, and that did not sting the elder ruffian, himself absolutely without personal fear.

For years he had tried to blind himself to this great defect, but long before this he had given over all such efforts. And when alone with each other, neither one tried to make the truth appear false.

"Now tell me the straight story, will you?" added the father, as they moved leisurely along toward town. "You lied before them, and I let it go at that. You needn't lie to me, Noll."

"You wouldn't swallow it if I did," chuckled the whelp.

He told a fairly straight story, this time, and Warren Gilchrist listened without an interruption, though it was bitter as gall for him to receive this fresh proof of his son's cowardice.

"He'll never turn up to tell how-come-ye-so," grimly chuckled the rascal, after describing how he had kicked the Grip-sack Sharp into Satan's Soup-bowl. "He never come to the top, after striking the drink, and only had time for that one yelp."

"Still, he may pass through the range. Others have done it."

"Not alive, though, and that's all we need care for. Say he is vomited forth below, and discovered? It will be called an accident, and the verdict will be—served him right for being so careless!"

"You say you left all things on his person?"

"Even to the little grip he carried—yes."

"I wish I could have seen and questioned him, but let it go at that," muttered Gilchrist, though his brows were wrinkled heavily as he recalled the fact of the stranger being so curious concerning Pitt Laxton. "He may have been after the old man, not us, after all."

"To arrest him, then, for I'll take oath he was an imp of the law!" positively asserted Oliver, adding, coaxingly: "For what crime, dad? The same one that gives you such a tight grip on the old codger?"

"Never you mind my grip. Think of your own, rather. You've played the ass to-day, just as you played it before. Are you mad, or simply too big an idiot to see how recklessly you are endangering your hopes of ever marrying Inza Laxton?"

"Blast the little spitfire! I wouldn't turn a hand over to marry her, for herself. What itches me is a longing to get even with that dirty cur, Fred Benight!"

Warren Gilchrist stared into the face of his whelp for a moment in silence, then broke into a short, ugly laugh.

"Cur, you call him, Noll? Then I got hold of the wrong end of the story, after all, about your little scrap last month? You came out on top, and Benight at the bottom, eh?"

Oliver showed his teeth, but it was a sickly grin.

"He took me when I wasn't on my guard, and you know it, dad."

"I know that Fred Benight thrashed you in public, because you openly boasted that you were going to marry Inza Laxton."

"Well, I am, ain't I?"

"And Fred Benight is still living! Noll, your mother is dead and in her grave, and of course she was all that was good and what a dutiful wife ought to be. But—if she was alive, darn me if I wouldn't have to ask her if you really belonged to me! I couldn't help it. For you are an arrant coward; the very first of the name that I know of!"

"Take after my dad, maybe," sulkily mumbled Oliver, edging out of reach of that heavy hand.

"You lie, Noll. If you took after me, Fred Benight wouldn't be standing in your path this day. If he had struck me, as he struck you, the blow wouldn't have quit smarting before I'd have had my knife clear through his heart!"

"I'll get there yet. I've not forgotten, but I'm not such a hot-head as you dad."

"Well, I should remark!"

"I'm only waiting until the row is forgotten, then I'll jump the fellow some dark night and let out his life—sick enough to suit even your critical taste, dad."

There was a bitter tinge to the smile on the elder man's face as he watched his son through this sanguinary speech. Never before had he so fully realized what a coward had sprung from his loins.

"Through his back, of course, Noll, he slowly asked.

"Of course," with a reckless nod. "I'm no fool, when it comes to anything like that, and I'd be a blamed ass to give him even the ghost of a chance to git in a return lick—now wouldn't I?"

"From your standpoint, yes. I only wish you were as prudent in some other respects; in dealing with the girl, for instance."

"What matter?" with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "She's stuck on Fred Benight, and I couldn't make her fall in love with me if I were to crack the sky wide open trying."

"Look out that you don't let Fred Benight get away with her, as slick and smooth as he got away with you, Noll!"

"You'll guard against that, of course, dad."

"I can't do everything. You must play your part, and play it heap sight better than you have thus far, mind that! Some day Inza will be richest of the rich—she'll have millions, boy!"

"That's why I'm so mighty bad stuck on her, dad!" grinned Oliver.

"Then play your cards as you should. Don't make her hate and despise you so bad that she'll kill herself rather than take you for a husband. If you do make a fizzle of it, after all my plotting and planning, I'll give you such a thrashing that your dose from Fred Benight won't seem a patching beside it!"

Oliver made no reply, hardly relishing the turn the conversation was taking, and the two rascals walked along in silence for some time, hardly interchanging a score of words before they fairly entered Solom City.

They parted here, Warren Gilchrist bidding Oliver keep from the bottle and to hold himself in readiness for a summons, should the necessity for hasty action occur.

On parting from his whelp, the human bulldog made his way directly to the hotel where he took his meals, eating a hearty supper, then proceeding to the small frame building, in front of which swung his sign: that of lawyer and loan agent.

Locking the door behind him, he struck a light, dressing his wounded finger, then passing into a tiny room at the rear, dropping upon a narrow cot which formed his nightly resting-place.

He left the light burning in the office, though turned low, and it was late that night before sleep visited his eyes.

He had much to think of, for he was playing a desperate game on which depended millions of money.

He was still reviewing his evil schemes when he fell asleep, to renew them in his dreams, and they were still in his busy brain the next morning when a heavy pounding on his office door broke his rest, causing him to leap from the cot and hasten into the other room without stopping to dress.

"What do you want? Who are you?" he called out, when near the door.

"Open up, boss!" came the deep tones of Dry-throat Johnny. "I've got big news—the devil's afoot, captain!" he added, hoarsely, as the door was hastily opened to permit his entrance.

"How? what shape? Talk quick and sharp, curse you!"

"That fellow said a better man was coming to take his place, and I reckon he meant it all! Mack Souders—"

"Ha! that bloodhound here?" panted Gilchrist, turning ghastly pale.

"Must have come on the stage, but I only spotted him this morning at the hotel. What must be done first, captain?"

"Take Gypsy Joe and join the lads at the cabin. Nab the pair, and hustle them down to the Den—lively! Curse the bitter, black luck! I'd give a thousand dollars if that bloodhound hadn't turned up just at this moment! Off with you, for the devil's afoot, sure enough!"

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT BORN TO BE DROWNED.

FEW men ever faced what seemed like certain destruction with cooler brain or steadier nerves than did Sidney Harper that day.

Although the bonds were taken from his limbs, and his physical powers were hardly impaired by the terrific struggle which he had so recently passed through, he realized the folly of attempting resistance just then.

Three pair of strong hands were grasping him as he stood on the very edge of the rock bordering that side of the "Soup-bowl," and with a single impulse they could hurl him far out and downward to meet his doom.

And yet—life was very sweet!

Even as he told himself that to struggle would add grim delight to his enemies, his muscle began to swell and stiffen like those of an athlete who finds the supreme battle of his life at hand.

Dry-throat Johnny and Fire-top Finney also felt those snaky folds and steel-like bands in motion, and if Oliver Gilchrist had not taken prompt action, he would surely have been cheated out of at least a portion of his devilish revenge on the man who had so completely humiliated him.

That fierce thrust came before Grip-sack Sid could obey his instinct to attempt a fight for life even if the most he could hope for was to drag one or more of his enemies down to share death in his company, and turning end for end as he shot downward, a single wild cry escaped his lips before he plunged headlong into that yeasty mass of boiling water.

And yet, taken by surprise though he undoubtedly was, the Grip-sack Sharp did not entirely lose sight of the one faint hope with which he had been inspired as he stood gazing into the Soup-bowl while his enemies were removing his bonds.

A skilled and powerful swimmer, he might have stood a chance of saving life by crossing the caldron before the whirling current should draw him into the bowels of the hill through that barely visible arch of rock, but he knew any attempt on his part to gain the low rock ledge opposite would surely be foiled by his judge and jury.

There was only one other chance left him, and he strove desperately to take advantage of it.

Striking the pool head-foremost, Harper instinctively curved his back and struck out desperately with his limbs, hoping to come to the surface on the same side of the bowl where his executioners stood, but close to the wall, where the waters had eaten away the limestone.

Once there, and hidden from their sight, he hoped to find some resting-place, some point by which he might cling to life until they had gone away and he could devise some method of escaping death by drowning.

The boiling, tossing, whirling waters seemed twisting him limb from limb, while a hideous pressure threatened to crush in his ribs as he fought for life. Then—the mighty walls of Satan's Soup-bowl seemed to fall upon him, and he knew nothing more.

But Sidney Harper was not born to be drowned, and ultimately he came back to life and sensibility.

Where he was, how he had been saved from that frightful whirlpool, how long he had been lost to consciousness, he could not even guess.

His first sensation was one of suffocation, accompanied by a decidedly disagreeable grinding between his teeth as he strove to clear his mouth for fresh air.

Only sand could give that feeling, and as he spit and sputtered, Sidney Harper felt comparatively dry sand beneath his hands, though his lower limbs were plainly in the water.

"Dry land—where am I?"

Dazed, stiff in limbs and benumbed in mind, the detective instinctively dragged himself further from the water.

As yet he was hardly sure that he still lived, but with the passage of each moment his brain grew clearer, his wits to rally, his blood to circulate more freely.

All about him was darkness most intense. Not the faintest glimmer of light to be seen. Darkness that seemed to weigh upon him, heavy as lead.

"Not hell, for where there's fire there must be light."

Grip-sack Sid gave a start as those words smote upon his ears, for he did not recognize his own voice at first, and was not conscious of having tried to speak.

"Who's there?" he forced himself to cry, as he started half-erect, shrinking back in the darkness as he heard the same unearthly voice—his own, as he now knew, though it sounded so unnatural in that horrible place.

The action caused something to slip forward against his hand, and that touch did more than all before to restore his wool-gathering wits.

It was his never-absent grip, which even those swirling waters had been unable to rob him of.

With a hoarse, inarticulate cry he grasped the sack, feeling for the catch, opening it and inserting his hand to fumble among the various articles contained therein, to come forth again with a cold, polished object tightly clutched between his fingers.

"Warranted waterproof and wind tight—best and cheapest in the market!" he muttered, hardly conscious of his own words as he found a spring that caused a neatly-fitting lid to spring open.

It was a metal match-safe, and full of tiny wax tapers, as he knew full well.

To his eager touch they seemed dry, and selecting one, he wiped the corrugated end of the safe on his cheek, over and over until assured that every atom of moisture was banished. Then—a faint crackling sound, a bright flash, that speedily settled down to a pure, steady glow.

Powerful for a match, the tiny torch only ate a very small hole into that pall of utter blackness, but it was enough to bring life and hope and something like cheeriness back to the man whose eager eyes roved about him.

He could only see the sand on which he was crouching, with the black water slowly eddying just below his feet, but that was enough to assure him that he was in no immediate danger of death, whatever his ultimate fate might be.

The deep, sullen roaring told him that he must be inside a mighty cavern of some sort, and a shiver crept over him as he realized what it meant to be thus entombed alive!

Sticking the wax match on a pin, to economize his lights as much as possible, Grip-sack Sid rose to his feet and cautiously groped his way further from that black pool, reaching some loose rocks before his tiny torch died down to a spark of ash.

Two more matches he used up, during which time he groped his way through quite a space, gaining no little encouragement from the fact that here and there were distinct traces of human labors; fresh broken rock, the imprint of metal tools, with here and there the track of a booted foot.

"Some one has been here within a week, and he isn't visible now. If I don't stumble across his carcass—Ugh!" with an involuntary shiver at the ugly fancy.

As the third match died away, Grip-sack Sid sunk down in a comparatively dry spot among the loose stones fringing the base of a wall.

He lost all desire for further exploration with that awful idea. He would cling to hope a bit longer. He would convince himself that the man who had left all those signs behind him, had escaped from that frightful prison—

"Not a prison for him, I'm betting long odds on it!" he doggedly muttered, closing his eyes with a longing for sleep that he would no longer resist. He had tools. He couldn't bring them with him by the route I took. Ergo, he came another road. Came and went! And where one man can go, I can follow!"

His head pained him badly, for the scalp was torn open for several inches on one side, doubtless from coming in contact with a sunken rock when oblivion came upon him in that fierce battle for life with the boiling waters in the Soup-bowl.

The stupor of utter exhaustion stole over him, and once more he was lost to consciousness of his grim situation.

To be awakened by the sound of human voices!

Dazed, bewildered, blinking stupidly as his heavy eyes fell upon two points of light that, contrasted with the horrible darkness in which he had been plunged for so long, seemed brilliant and blinding as noonday suns, Grip-sack Sid

leaned on an elbow, watching father and daughter as they passed him by, bound for the golden sands where the elder had found a fortune.

A low cry escaped his lips as he recognized the maiden whom he had rescued from the vile grip of Oliver Gilchrist, but the sound was lost amid that sullen roaring, and with that recognition came back all the keen wits of the professional detective.

His eyes, glowing like those of a wild beast, followed every movement made by Pitt Laxton, noting each change of his face, printing each line, each feature on his own brain with the fidelity of a camera, until he could have sworn to the man's identity among ten thousand others, even though an age should pass before they met again.

"With her—it must be the man!" came harshly across his lips.

If he heard the words which Pitt Laxton spoke, telling Inza of his wonderful bonanza, they passed unheeded. For the time being he could think of nothing but the great discovery he himself had made; of the criminal for whom he had been searching so long and steadily.

And yet he made no attempt to claim his prey just then, though how it would have been had Inza not been clinging to the arm of her father can only be guessed at.

"Not yet! Time enough! 'Twill be another bitter drop in the cup of vengeance if I can tell him how he unwittingly saved me from death by starvation in this frightful hole!"

Grim, ugly thoughts like these were flashing through the busy brain of the detective, causing him to keep well without the limited circle of light cast through the gloom by those candles, and when Pitt Laxton turned away from the golden sands, he crouched low behind his breastwork of loose rocks, waiting unseen until the father and daughter had passed him by, then creeping out silently, dogging them as they retraced their steps toward the secret entrance to the wonderful mine.

He was so close behind them when Pitt Laxton paused in front of the little chamber containing his store of gold, that he could catch each spoken word without the slightest difficulty. And while the miner was uncovering his hoard for the benefit of his daughter, the detective was where he could see and even count the number of skin sacks.

"Your secret bonanza, is it?" he laughed softly beneath his breath as Laxton took out two of the sacks, then covered over the rest as before. "Big enough, rich enough, but I wouldn't give my discovery this night for all of it, told ten times over!"

Still keeping under cover, Grip-sack Sid watched the further movements of the couple of explorers, his eyes glistening vividly as their lights shone upon the store of weapons and provisions near the point where the rope ladder was hanging from the rock ledge above.

He followed them with his eager eyes as they ascended the ladder, noting where it was fastened to the rocks above, and marking the dim light which sifted through the bushes over the crevice, knowing that he must escape by that route if at all; but he made no move until the lights were put out, and the twain had vanished from sight.

"Food, arms, freedom, and above all the vengeance which I swore so many long years ago!" he cried, half beside himself with fierce exultation, as he rose from his covert and groped his way forward.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SERAPHS ON GUARD-DUTY.

THE two Seraphs selected by Warren Gilchrist for guard-duty, set out for their destination at a rapid pace, but no sooner were they fairly out of range of those keen eyes than Fire-top Finney came to an abrupt halt, barring the way of his comrade.

"Calipers, I'll give you a big round dollar if you'll stoop over and give me surface for one solid kick!"

"What's tearin' your shirt now?" growled the bow-legged ruffian, scowling suspiciously as he stood on guard, more than half expecting some pranky trick on the part of his volatile companion.

"I want to get the evil taste out of my mouth, Calipers, and I can't think of an easier way than that. Let me kick you, just once!"

"Let me blow a hole big a-plenty fer a dog to jump through!" the other growled, hand on revolver as he backed away a pace or two.

"Can I cuss you a little, then? You won't fly off the handle if I call you Noll Gilchrist?" earnestly pleaded the red-headed rascal.

"I'd rather be kicked, heap sight," grinned the bow-legs, beginning to divine what his eccentric mate was driving at.

"Of course you would, and so would any decent gentleman," said Fire-top, dropping his exaggerated manner and showing his genuine disgust as he leisurely resumed his way through the hills. "Think of it, will you?"

"I'd rather not," with a shrug of his ragged shoulders.

"The contemptible sneak! The lying cur! The putty-faced ass! The—confound you, Billy

Bowlegs, why don't you chip in and help me find terms mean and low and degraded enough to begin to express the utter worthlessness of that miserable fraud?"

"Beca'se I ain't sech a durn fool," grinned Calipers. "Beca'se words hain't bin 'vented fit fer to tell the like."

"Calipers, you're a gentlemen—shake!" and their hands came together in an ardent grip that testified plainer than words how united they were in their dislike and contempt for the bull-dog's whelp.

"An' the wust of it is how the boss sucks it all in," frowned the man with the circular understanding.

"Before us," laughed Fire-top, seemingly relieved by his recent outburst. "Don't you believe he's nigh the fool he plays, Tick, but he won't let on in company. He simply worships that idiot cub of his, and if it wasn't against his religion to pray, reckon he'd bow down before that ugly image of cowardly conceit."

"Waal, the boss is the pure quill, anyway."

"You're mighty right, Calipers, and that's why I bottle up while in their company. If he wasn't—well, there'd be wolf-bait lying 'round loose, sure's you're a foot high!"

"A coyote'd hev to be almighty hongry 'fore he'd even take a smell at that sort o' bait, pardner," grinned Bowlegs. "But that ain't what the boss sent us over this way fer. How d'ye like the job?"

"I'd like it heap better if I knew that Laxton would actually pay a visit to his bonanza, while under our guardianship, Calipers!"

"They wouldn't none o' the dust stick to your fingers, I don't reckon, Red-head?"

"No more than there would to yours," was the laughing response.

Silence fell between the two rascals after that. Possibly the picture conjured up by those final words was so interesting that it gave them sufficient exercise for their minds without other aids.

As they drew near the lone cabin, their actions became more guarded, and snugly stowed away in a covert from whence they could easily note all that took place near the log house, the guards settled down to their duty.

They caught sight of both Pitt Laxton and Inza, so they knew that their game had as yet made no effort toward escaping from the toils so cunningly spun by Warren Gilchrist.

Nothing occurred to break the monotony of their watch until after the sun had set and darkness began to settle over the hills. Then Fire-top Finney sharply nudged Calipers with an elbow as he caught sight of two figures leaving the cabin.

"I'm seein', durn ye!" growled the bow-legged ruffian, his greedy eyes all aglow as he saw the couple move away from rather than toward the little stable where Laxton kept his horses. "I'm a liar ef I don't begin to reckon—low down, pardner!"

"The bonanza, for rocks!" sibilated Finney, flattening out like a snake as the pair came nearer their covert.

Little suspecting how near they were to two of their deadliest foes, Pitt Laxton led his daughter toward the hidden mine, passing almost within arm's-length of the outlaws. And fairly holding their breath the two knaves lay low, fearing discovery just when they felt secrecy to be the most valuable.

The growing dusk stood them in good part, for under the glow of the sun it would hardly have been possible for Laxton to have passed them by without seeing them. Though snug and perfect enough on the side toward the cabin, there was scant cover for the rascals on the rear.

"Muffle your hoofs and play you are walking over sleeping rattlers all the while, pard," softly breathed Fire-top, cresting his neck to note the precise course taken by those whom they had been set to watch over. "If it wouldn't hoo-loo the whole job, I'd beg you to pray that the old codger is bound for his bonanza!"

Calipers Tick was far too intensely interested to pay attention to this left-handed compliment, and cool-witted, steel-nerved though he ordinarily was, even Fire-top hardly knew what sounds passed his lips.

Laxton was not fleeing for life, else he would have taken the horses, or at least have carried some provisions for the journey. He had left the trail leading to Sodom, so he could not be seeking a refuge there. Then—why not the secret mine?

Silently as though shod in velvet, the two outlaws stole after their prey, keeping them well in sight, yet hugging the ground closely, in readiness to sink out of sight at the first sign of suspicion on the part of the man whom they were dogging to his secret hoard.

They saw Pitt Laxton come to a halt when near the entrance of his mine, and they instantly sought cover, reaching it unsuspected in the gloom, greedily watching the further movements of their game.

They saw Laxton creep into the bushes, but as Inza stood on guard with her rifle, they dared not risk an advance, though they felt more and more confident that the secret bonanza was almost within their grasp.

Then Laxton reappeared, and after a slow look around, vanished again, this time followed by his daughter.

"Steady, pard!" warningly hissed Finney, checking his mate while keenly watching the open ground beyond the clump of shrubbery. "Don't tear your shirt. If they don't come in sight on the other side, we've got 'em—got 'em foul, for sure!"

Several minutes passed by without aught further being seen of the Laxtons, and then the eager rascals crawled up to the bushes, penetrating them until they came upon the open crevice, with its disguising slab of rock upturned just beyond it.

For a breathless minute they waited, listening, looking, every sense on the keen alert. Then their hands joined in a fierce grip of delight and congratulation.

"Bonanza, for rocks, pard!" chuckled Finney.

"Shell we foller down an' make sure o' it all, mate?" hoarsely muttered Calipers, his eyes shining redly with unholy greed.

Fire-top Finney made no immediate reply. The temptation was powerful indeed, and had Warren Gilchrist been nearer the caliber of his son, doubtless the red-headed rascal would have yielded to it. But then he drew a long breath that was almost a sigh, shaking his head as he gently pushed his eager partner back.

"Not now, Calipers. We've got to follow orders or suffer broken pates. Back out and take cover once more."

"But durn it all!"

"The hole can't get away, can it?" frowned Finney, retreating. "And if Laxton brings his wealth with him, can't we freeze to it then?"

Grumbling, growling, discontentedly, Calipers followed the lead of his mate, and once more the little clump of bushes was left to keep its silent guard over the secret mine.

With intense impatience, not unmixed with doubts as to whether the Laxtons would ever come back that way, whether or no they might not have some other mode of leaving the underground bank, the Seraphs waited and watched from their ambush.

"Don't be an ass, Calipers," growled Fire-top, when his mate hinted at that doubt. "Wouldn't he have covered over this hole if he didn't mean to come back the same way? Dead sure he would!"

At last they were rewarded by the sight of their game, and to their grim delight they saw that Pitt Laxton bore two weighty sacks of something in his left hand as he slipped out into the moonlight.

Hardly waiting until they had passed by where they lay in hiding, the ruffians stole over to the bushes, seeing that the crevice was once more snugly covered over, the slab hidden by leaves and dirt.

"Shell we?" hoarsely whispered Calipers, greedy for gold.

"It can't get away. No—orders first," doggedly replied Finney, as he pushed his covetous mate back.

They quickly struck the track of the Laxtons, having no difficulty in dogging them back to the cabin, over which they once more took up their watch and ward.

Naturally enough their thoughts were occupied by the discovery which they had so recently made, and when satisfied that there was no immediate prospect of the Laxtons taking to flight, they began talking it over.

"Shall we tell the boss all we see'd, pard?" ventured Calipers.

"What have we seen that is so mighty important?" asked Finney. "A hole in the ground, but when we looked again, there wasn't anything of the sort. Might it not have been a shadow, the first time?"

"I'd hate mightily to think that way, though!"

"And even if there was a hole, who can swear that it leads to anything worth talking about? Suppose we tell the chief, and so arouse his hopes, only to have them blasted on investigation: wouldn't he be mighty apt to blast us, in turn?"

"Then—it's jest 'twixt you 'nd me!" greedily persisted Tick.

"Well, I reckon we'd better wait until we have spare time to look a little closer into the matter before speaking of it to the boss. It will be plenty soon if we tell him after we've made sure it's more than a water-haul. If it is, of course neither you nor I would for a moment think of dividing the wealth before spreading it all before the Family, Calipers?"

"I kin lick the critter as'd dar' hint at sech a dirty trick!" indignantly exclaimed the bow-legged ruffian.

With a mutual laugh the two Seraphs resumed their watch over the lone cabin and its inmates.

The hours crept on until it must have been considerably past midnight before aught occurred to interest them particularly below; but then they caught sight of Pitt Laxton stealing from the house to the stable, and they felt that the moment for action had come at last.

"Wish we could let them slide, but 'twon't do!" growled Fire top, as he crept from his co-

vert, approaching the cabin just as Laxton returned, leading two horses which he hitched hard by.

He entered the cabin, striking a light, by which the Seraphs recognized Inza Laxton, ready dressed as if for a journey. And Fire-top Finney stepped upon the threshold, speaking sharply:

"You've missed the train, pardner! Warren Gilchrist says that you want to stay right here until—Ha!"

He reeled back as Laxton fired a pistol so close to his face that the flame fairly scorched his mustaches, but rallying instantly, he drew a revolver and fired it.

With a horrible cry Pitt Laxton reeled back, to fall in a heap!

CHAPTER XV.

THE GRIP-SACK SHARP CHIPS IN.

SIDNEY HARPER groped his way forward until his outstretched hands came in contact with the rock wall, and he knew that he stood directly beneath the crevice through which Pitt Laxton and his fair daughter had made their exit from the hidden bonanza.

He turned his eyes upward, but could detect naught. Everything was black, and the darkness seemed to weigh down upon his face like a damp pall.

"But things are mighty different now from what they used to be!" he laughed softly to himself, as he recalled that awful feeling back by the golden sands when he first returned to life and sensibility. "With a front door ready to be opened; with a provision store close to one elbow, and an arsenal at the other, to say nothing of a private bank just around the corner—who wouldn't feel set up a bit?"

He knew that by striking a match he could quickly find and light one of the candles left behind by Pitt Laxton, but he was in no over-haste to do this.

"Give him rope, old man!" he advised himself, between his spells of watching and listening. "He may take a notion to come back on his own hook, or—"

He stood ready to beat a hasty retreat to his former post of observation, for he fancied that he could detect sounds above that might imply the re-lifting of the rock covering the entrance.

There was something of the wolf in his eager crouching, and if those real or imaginary sounds had been followed by the coming of Pitt Laxton, beyond a doubt he would have found a warm reception awaiting his landing at the base of the rock wall.

Instead, the noise was caused by the inspection of the two Seraphs, and as no further sounds came to his eager ears, it was not difficult for Harper to convince himself he had been mistaken from the first.

Still he waited patiently, crouching there in utter darkness, and until fully assured that Pitt Laxton could have no intention of returning to his bonanza that night, at least, he denied himself both light and refreshment.

"It'll taste all the better when I can wade in my length!" he philosophically assured himself.

At length, when even his caution seemed superfluous, the Grip-sack Sharp struck a taper and crossed over to where Pitt Laxton had placed his partly consumed candles when their aid was no longer required.

"Talk about your illumination!" muttered Harper, as he touched the blackened wick of the second candle to its glowing mate, gazing at the twin lights through his nearly closed lids until his eyes could grow accustomed to the comparative brilliancy. "Never saw half so much light at any one time in the whole course of my personal experience! If the roof wasn't over us, I'm betting the moon would look like a big hunk of shoemaker's wax!"

Sticking one candle to the rock by means of its own melted wax, he took the other across the level to the ledge on which Pitt Laxton had arranged his miniature arsenal. Securing the light after the same fashion, he quickly selected a brace of revolvers and a repeating rifle from among the collection, together with a couple of boxes of fixed ammunition.

"Can't say as I'll have any particular use for them," he muttered, with a grim, hard smile on his strong face while making his choice. "But the woods seem to be full of Seraphs, and it'd be a pity if I wasn't rigged out fit to hold up my part of the concert when the band begins to play. And then—it may look like robbery, but I'm open to lay long odds that Pitt Laxton never will have any further use for the tools—big odds, my boy!"

The candle-light cast a glow across his face that, just then, revealed an expression such as few living men had ever witnessed in connection with the silver-tongued, open-hearted Sample Sport. If Pitt Laxton could have seen and rightly interpreted it, he might have felt this world contained even deadlier enemies than Warren Gilchrist.

Although his grip had not been torn from him by the swirling waters, Harper had lost his revolver and his watch. The latter could not be replaced, of course, but the other could, and with a presentiment that the time was close at hand when he would need such backing, he se-

cured the brace of revolvers and the Winchester, noting with grim satisfaction that they all used the same sized cartridges.

"No such thing as mixing the babies up, thank you," he chuckled, taking his weapons with him back to the opposite ledge. "And now for a picnic, all by my hungry self!"

From among the stores so prudently collected by Pitt Laxton, the Grip-sack Sharp selected a chunk of dried and smoked meat as the staple, prying off the lid of a tin box, which proved to contain crackers.

Flanking these with a bottle which he sampled just enough to be certain that it contained a tolerable grade of whisky, he curled up his damp legs tailor-fashion, nodding his approval while glancing over the rows of canned provisions:

"A hungry man would be a hog to ask better than this, and you can bide your time, my gay jacketed friends. If I can win my way out o' this, so much the better for your integrity. If I can't—well, I'll give you a sarcophagus handsome as a picture and twice as interesting. A brother couldn't ask more than that, now could he?"

Making use of his keen pen-knife—a sample, taken from his never-failing grip, by the way—to slice the dry beef, occasionally moistening his throat with liquor, Harper managed to satisfy his hunger as the time rolled by.

While thus pleasantly occupied, his brain was not idle, and from the frequent glances which he cast up toward the covered exit from the cave, the subject of his meditations might easily be guessed.

The faint rays of the candles, of course, could afford him scant assistance, for the darkness hung like a solid bank of black fog above and around them, giving each a curious halo; but for that he cared comparatively little.

While spying upon Pitt Laxton and his daughter, Harper had marked the approach to the exit very carefully, knowing that upon this surely depended not only his escape, but the fulfillment of that solemn oath of vengeance which he had taken so long ago.

"It'll be fishing in the dark, but I'm open to bet I'll make the raffle without a serious balk," he muttered, as he recorked the black bottle and pushed it back upon the shelf, its contents very slightly diminished. "Because I've got to!"

He swung his dampened grip around and opened it so that the candle-light fell inside as he fumbled about for certain articles.

"Not much the worse for wear, like its master!" he muttered, with a grim smile, as he found the inside comparatively dry. "Now if I didn't forget to put them in before leaving town, I'll—Hello!"

Withdrawing his hand, he held a battered bit of lead to the light.

It was the bullet which had been the means of introducing Inza Laxton to his notice, and as he inspected it more closely, he knew that his earlier supposition was the right one.

"Shot at the goose and bit the gander!" he smiled, as he noted the tiny fragments of bark or wood driven into the battered missile. "I'll keep it as a lucky-pie. Only for that—Well, his neck might be many a mile further from a noose than it is this holy minute!"

Stowing away the bit of lead, the Grip-sack Sharp produced a little tin box and a small bank of braided linen fish-line, closing the grip again and falling to work with swift dexterity.

The tin box contained fish-hooks, and he tied these in threes, back to back, making miniature grapnels out of them, which he tied to the line by short lengths cut from the same. Then weighting the line with a small, smooth stone, he looked ready for business.

Standing clear of the rocks, he coiled the line in one hand, casting his grapnels up with his other, letting the line run smoothly out as required.

Time and again the weighted line came dropping back without effecting aught, but Harper had discounted this, and showed no signs of impatience. Without light to guide his aim, he was working blindly, but he felt that he must succeed in the end.

Once the hooks caught on the unseen ledge above, yielding only to a steady strain that snapped one of the hooks before the line came flying back; but an abundance of others were left, and now the keen-witted Sharp had gotten the right distance.

After that each cast sent his line to the ledge, and in a few minutes more he laughed exultantly as he felt the hooks catch in the rope ladder. Steadily twitching, he felt the rope give, though the line came back only a few feet. It had caught too near the upper end of the ladder, but he made no effort to break its hold.

Stepping back a little, he swung his line to and fro as far as his arms would allow and little by little the swaying of the stone at the upper end caused the ladder to slip downward. Then, in a heap, its lower end swung from the ledge, dropping down to touch the rock floor at the base of the wall.

Knowing now that escape was assured, Harper knotted a kerchief about his brows for lack of a neater head-covering, securing his

arms, putting out one candle but carrying the other in his hand as he quickly ascended the rope ladder to the ledge above.

A brief inspection by the light showed him how the entrance was sealed, and first blowing out his light, he pushed up the rock, quickly emerging from what had so recently promised to be his living tomb.

"Feels mighty good, don't it, pardner?" he laughed, softly, as he gazed up at the star-studded vault, then around him by the clear light of the full moon. "If only—well, if man will sin, man must suffer and pay the penalty for his crimes!"

The words came with a sigh, for his own narrow escape from what had seemed certain death, to a degree softened the nature of the man-hunter, though it could not seriously shake his stern resolve to complete the tragic errand which had brought him to Sodom City.

He covered the crevice over with the slab, sprinkling dirt and dead leaves over it again, then left the clump of bushes, pausing long enough to note certain landmarks so that he might recognize the spot again should fate decide upon his returning for that purpose.

This done, he made a guess at the proper course to follow in order to strike the Sodom City trail, and briskly strode along through the bright moonlight.

"It's a blind lead, and if my clothes weren't so deucedly damp, don't know but what I'd take a lay-down and try for forty winks. Dollars to cents I'll catch the break o' day heap sight further from town than I am this minute, but—"

He came to an abrupt pause, crouching forward, every sense on the intense strain.

The sound of a pistol had smote upon his ear, and was followed like an echo by another, both sounding from the same quarter, and that almost directly in his front.

"Fun afoot, and I'm hungry for just that sort o' diversion!" he grimly muttered, fixing the point and then pressing forward as rapidly as circumstances would permit.

Thanks to moonlight this was brisk enough, and after a few minutes' work he came abruptly into view of the Laxton cabin, to witness a scene that set his blood to boiling.

Calipers Tick was dragging Inza Laxton toward a waiting horse, despite her cries and frantic struggles, while Fire-top Finney was bending over a prostrate figure just inside the open door.

"Easy, you devils!" sternly cried the Grip-sack Sharp as he dashed forward, pistol in hand to see Calipers drop his prize to draw a pistol and level it in that direction.

"Crack! crack!" the two weapons exploded, almost as one, and with a hideous screech the bow-legged outlaw dropped in a lifeless heap.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONE CHANCE IN A THOUSAND.

THE Sample Sport twisted to one side as he felt a hot streak shoot along his ribs, but the sting was but momentary, and he knew that he had escaped serious injury.

He saw his target fall, and from that horrible yell he knew he had not wasted his lead; but he gave the fallen rascal hardly a second thought, just then.

Calipers Tick, recognizing a foe, had flung his captive back toward his comrade, boldly rushing upon his own doom.

Inza Laxton had thoughts only for her father, and with a panting cry she regained her balance, rushing to the door of the cabin, just in time to be met by Fire-top Finney, pistol in hand.

"Out o' the way, curse ye!" that villain snarled, his free hand striking her down as he leaped through the opening and dodged behind one of the snorting, frightened horses.

"Halt! hands up and empty or I'll blow—"

Harper caught his movements and hurled that stern challenge at the Seraph, but it was cut short by a couple of bullets that came from the equine breastworks, one at least being so well aimed that he plainly felt the wind disturbed by its passage.

His fighting blood fairly up, the Grip-sack Sharp came charging, shooting as he jumped, but firing high lest he kill or cripple the horse, his prime object being to force the outlaw from cover to meet him on an equality.

Instead of that, he beheld Fire-top Finney spring cat-like upon the frightened animal, wheeling and dashing swiftly around the house.

Grip-sack Sid had only time for a single shot, and that of the hastiest possible order, before the rascal was shut off from his view, and though he rushed forward as swiftly as possible, he could only trace the flight of the Seraph for a moment or two by the thump thump of iron-shod hoofs.

He thought of pursuit, but that would be folly afoot, and the horse which Calipers Tick had prepared for himself and his fair captive, had broken its fastenings and fled in fright at the wild cries and free firing.

"Curse a coward, anyway!" muttered the detective, pausing long enough to reload his empty pistol, using his eyes and his ears to the best possible advantage meanwhile.

He saw that his first target still lay as it had dropped, without sound or motion, and as a low, wailing cry came from the cabin, his attention was turned in that direction.

"Father—daddy, dear—look up—speak to me, to your little woman!" came a hardly articulate voice. "Say that you are not dead! Speak to me, if only a word! Daddy—daddy—"

A hoarse, choking sound rose in the throat of the detective as he began to realize what all this might mean to him, and with a mighty bound he gained the threshold of the cabin; to pause as though turned to stone by the spectacle which met his glittering eyes.

Pitt Laxton lay on the broad of his back, his head thrown back, his mouth open, his eyes staring as though sight had forever passed from them, a widening pool of blood marking the floor at his side.

Inza was kneeling beside him, half-distracted with grief and fear, hardly conscious of her words or actions, thinking only of winning a word, a look of recognition from her loved one.

And Sidney Harper?

As he noted that death-like face, as he saw how insensible Pitt Laxton was to the prayers of his distracted child, a cold chill seemed to settle about his heart, turning his blood to ice.

"After all these years, is this how I meet my man?"

Over and over those words seemed to flash across his brain and to echo sharply through his ears. So distinctly, in fact, that the detective gave a start and cast a swift glance about in quest of the one who gave such free utterance to his own bitter regret.

The action seemed to break the spell which had fallen upon him, and once more he was the cool, steady, resolute man of the world.

"Miss Laxton," he spoke, softening his voice to sympathy which was not wholly assumed for the occasion. "Your enemies are gone, and only a true friend remains. May I look after your father's hurts?"

He said more than he had intended, at first, but Inza gazed into his face with such a piteous look of bewilderment, that he longed to soothe before possibly frightening her by approaching closer.

"He is not—Daddy, daddy!" breaking off with a sob as she bowed across that motionless figure, shivering like a leaf.

Was it fancy? Did those staring eyes move? Had he been deceived in fancying that he saw those thin lips quiver?

Choking back the cry of almost savage exultation that longed to issue at the bare thought, Sidney Harper sprang forward and knelt by the side of the prostrate figure.

A single keen look, a touch of the hand to the breast, and then the Grip-sack Sharp was himself again.

"He lives, Miss Laxton," he said, clearly, rising and with gentle force lifting her limp figure from the wounded man. "Thank Heaven! she has fainted away—now I can work!"

Such was indeed the fact, and he carried the unconscious maiden across the room to the little chamber which he knew by instinct was sacred to her use. Placing her on the low couch, loosening her dress at the throat so that her breathing might not be obstructed, Harper hastily returned to the wounded miner.

Had this been his dearest friend, his own father, his actions could not have been more gentle, his interest greater, his hopes more fervent that the ending might be renewed life and strength.

But as he slit open the garments covering the wound, only an inch or two below the heart, and saw the discolored hole made by the outlaw's bullet in entering, his jaws squared grimly and his face grew pale as that of the injured man himself.

Still he refused to abandon all hope, and gently pushed his hand under the body, between the clothes and the skin, shivering sharply as his finger-tip found the place where the heavy bullet had emerged.

"Through and through!" he muttered, drawing back and wiping his hand with a shudder. "I've lost my game as soon as found!"

At that moment Pitt Laxton drew a shivering breath, moving his head slightly, and faintly gasping:

"Don't harm—little woman!"

"Daddy—dear daddy!" sobbed Inza, as she came from her chamber and dropped to her knees by his side, dampening his haggard face with her hot tears as she repeatedly kissed him. "You live—you are not badly hurt? Tell me you will get well, daddy, dear!"

"Of course—Ah!" a husky groan cutting short his words as he essayed to lift his head.

"What's matter—I can't—"

"Compose yourself, Miss Laxton," said Harper, in grave yet soothing tones, a hand gently touching the maiden's shoulder. "Your father is badly hurt, but he'll pull through if we give him a fair chance."

"I will—only tell me how I can help him," panted Inza, bravely fighting against that deathly sickness at her heart; an illness born of fear and grief, not for herself, but for one still dearer.

"By keeping your feelings under control.

Get me some linen for bandages, please. Scrape some lint, also. If we can check this loss of blood, he'll be all right after a time."

Sidney Harper spoke in even, matter-of-fact tones, just as though he fully believed every word that passed his lips, though he looked for death to come into the cabin with each minute that crept along. Still, he gained his prime object: Inza set about obeying his orders, and he knew that he was serving her a good turn by giving her something to do.

While she was thus occupied, he passed outside, to make sure that no enemy was prowling around for an avenging shot at himself. He bent over Calipers Tick long enough to see that the bow-legged ruffian had wrought his last evil deed in this world.

"It's saved the hangman a job, but I'm not so very sorry!" the detective grimly muttered, catching the Seraph by an arm and dragging him into a clump of bushes, where the body would be out of sight.

As he returned to the cabin, he found Inza with the bandages, and greatly to his amazement Pitt Laxton was trying to sit up!

"I can't breathe—lying here," gasped the wounded man, showing neither fear nor surprise at the presence of this stranger.

"Can we carry him to my bed, in yonder?" faintly asked Inza.

"After I bandage his wound," nodded Harper, kneeling beside his patient, and calling for water to wash the hurt.

While doing this, he satisfied himself that the bullet had indeed emerged, almost directly opposite the point where it had entered, and though he was greatly amazed by the unusual strength shown after such a serious wound, he knew that similar instances have been recorded.

"It's only the light flickering up as it drops into the socket!"

Yet he neglected no care while bandaging the wound, and tenderly lifted the miner in his powerful arms, bearing him to the bed of his daughter, then closely watched that haggard face while testing his pulse.

"He is not so badly hurt! He will live!" timidly ventured Inza, her lips close to his ear. "Say that he will live, and I'll bless you as I would an angel fresh from Heaven!"

"Live?" impatiently muttered Laxton himself, his eyes opening. "Of course I'll—Why not? I'm only—weak. The shock—"

"If he had proper medical care, his chances would be far better," gravely responded Harper. "If I dared leave you alone for a time, I might procure aid at Sodom City."

"Don't—take her with you!" cried Laxton, with startling power for a man who had, as Harper mentally decided, only one chance in a thousand of recovering from that terrible injury. "Those devils—come back for her!"

Inza fell to sobbing and crying at the bare notion of leaving his side while he was so badly hurt, but still with that fictitious power of will, rather than of body, Pitt Laxton insisted on her seeking safety in speedy flight.

"You must go, Miss Laxton," at length uttered Harper, gravely adding: "Your refusal might prove fatal to him in his present condition. See how terribly he is excited; go, as he wishes, or I'll not answer for the result."

"Must I, daddy?" sobbed Inza, almost broken-hearted at the thought.

"Go—suspense finish me, else," panted the miner.

With a clinging kiss, the poor girl turned away to prepare for the journey, while Laxton, seemingly gaining fresh strength as that matter was settled, managed to tell Harper what he wanted done with his child.

She would find a true friend in Thomas Massey, keeper of the main hotel in Sodom, called the Massasoit House. He was to place her in his care, then look up Doctor Grable and ride back to the cabin as rapidly as possible.

"I can pay—those devils only got part," the wounded man panted as his head fell back upon the pillow once more.

The uneasy whimper of a horse without drew Harper to the door, pistol in hand, but he gave a grim nod of satisfaction as he recognized the animal which had broken away from Calipers Tick when the shooting broke out.

He hastened to secure the horse, seeing that saddle and bridle were still in order, only the hitch-strap having snapped.

"Better than walking, because speedier. He's hardly one chance in a thousand, but I'll give him the benefit of that. Then—"

Urging the great necessity of haste, Grip-sack Sid, with a hat belonging to the miner, quickly had the sobbing maiden on the horse behind him, striking out at a rapid trot for Sodom City.

Half the distance was covered without event worthy of note, but then an angry shout came from the roadside, followed by a pistol-shot that caused Harper to reel in the saddle.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHANGE OF ESCORTS.

A SHORT, fierce cry parted his lips, but it was one of anger rather than of pain, for either haste on the part of the ambushed marksman or rapid motion on the part of the targets, had

caused a waste of lead so far as Grip-sack Sid was concerned.

"Halt, and release her, you knave!" came swiftly following that shot, the words blending with the report of the detective's pistol as he drew and fired with his left hand.

"Mercy!—spare him!" gasped Inza, grasping the arm of her escort with both hands so convulsively, that his aim was ruined, the bullet glancing harmlessly from a boulder alongside the trail, humming shrilly as it curved into space.

"Inza, jump!" cried the waylayer, breaking through the bushes by which the road was deeply fringed. "Release her, you devil, or I'll blow you to kingdom-come!"

"Fred—dear Fred!"

All at once Grip-sack Sid gave over his efforts to steady his horse sufficiently to enable him to catch even a snap-shot, and dropping the revolver where it would lodge between the pomel and his thighs, he held up his empty hands, crying distinctly:

"Don't shoot, Mr. Benight. Hands are up, and I'm your meat if you really want to claim it."

"I'll kill you if—Inza, he hasn't hurt you?"

"No—he's a true friend—oh, Fred, my poor father!"

With a choking sob the maiden slipped from her perch behind the Grip-sack Sharp, falling into the arms of the young man who had so unceremoniously arrested their ride to Sodom City.

"A friend? Then he didn't—I thought he was carrying you off against your will, Inza!" ejaculated the young man, clasping that sweet burden tightly to his bosom, yet casting a dubious glance into the grimly-smiling face of the horseman.

"Never mention it, pardner," laughed the Sample Sport, all rancor vanishing from his tones as by magic. "Neither of us broke skin, fortunately, and so apologies can be waived. Only—must I keep my dukes elevated until you get through there?"

"If you are really her friend?" hesitated the young man, clearly touched with something not far akin to jealousy.

"Take the lady's word for it, not mine alone," was the easy reply, as Harper lowered his hands, soothing the still frightened animal by word and touch. "But if you have any particular love for her father, Pitt Laxton, you'll move in a mighty hurry, or you'll be everlastingly too late to serve him or her!"

"Daddy—poor daddy!" moaned the maiden, shivering anew as she rallied and drew partially out of that loving embrace. "Save him, Fred, for my sake! He's—he's dying—oh!"

Her voice choked up with sobs, and she could not answer the eager, bewildered questions poured forth by the young man, but Sidney Harper dismounted and drew closer, his strong face lit up with mingled hope and satisfaction.

"Your name is really Fred Benight, and you live at Sodom City?" he asked, keenly scrutinizing the face before him.

It was a strong, yet handsome face, matching well with the active, muscular figure; the face of an honest man, who could prove as terrible to his enemies as he was true to his friends.

Apparently some four or five-and-twenty years of age, Fred Benight had fully completed his growth, the result being little short of perfection, physically speaking.

His hair and silky mustaches were of a golden brown, trim and well cared for. His eyes were large, hazel in color, now vividly bright as passionate love struggled with dying doubt and hot anger.

His garb was that of a prospector, though formed of better, finer material than the generality of gold-seekers wore, which might be accounted for by the fact that the woman of his love dwelt so near to his headquarters, rather than by any taint of dandyism.

Taken altogether it was an agreeable sight to look upon, and as he summed it up, Grip-sack Sid gave an unconscious nod of satisfaction.

"That's my name—and yours?" curtly said Benight.

"And you're acquainted with the lady? Good!" as he firmly gripped the irresolute hand of the young man, adding: "You can take her on to town, and I'll go back to the wounded gentleman."

"Daddy—poor daddy!" sighed Inza, her overstrained powers failing her for the moment, and her lithe figure hung heavily on the arm of her lover.

"Don't fly off the handle, Benight," quickly cried the Grip-sack Sharp, as the young man showed his lover-like fears. "She's all right, or will be in a very few minutes. She isn't hurt in body—only badly shocked in mind."

"If you've had a hand in this, I'll kill you by inches!" fiercely muttered the lover, his brown eyes turning red as they flashed into that cool face.

"If I hadn't chipped in, the Seraphs of Sodom would have had the girl out of the country by this, young fellow!" grimly retorted the Grip-sack Sport, but without showing any actual re-

sentiment to that menacing front. "When she comes to, she'll tell you that I shot one scoundrel dead as he tried to carry her off. I doubt if she knows what became of the rest, but they didn't linger long 'round the cabin."

"The Seraphs—what do you mean?" stammered the bewildered lover, half distracted between his fears for his dear one, lying so cold, so pale and still in his arms, and his desire to have that ugly mystery brushed aside. "What has happened, anyway?"

Grip-sack Sid made no immediate reply, but gently touched the closed lids of the maiden, then felt her pulse.

"The poor child has fainted, but 'twill last only a few minutes, at most, if you're sensible enough to lay her down that long," he said, in brisk, professional tones, at the same time removing the maiden from those reluctant arms, and gently lowering her to the cool earth, under shade of the bushes.

"She is not—she will not die!" huskily ventured Benight.

"Of old age, possibly, but surely not of this little faint spell," was the easy response. "Now, Mr. Benight, we can talk a bit without keeping a padlock on our lips."

"Of course I couldn't blurt it out before her face, but the sober fact is that Pitt Laxton has been terribly injured—shot through and through by one of the Seraphs, as they term themselves."

"Not killed?"

"He was alive when we left the cabin, but if he's breathing now, it's little short of a miracle. Still, he insisted on my escorting his daughter to Sodom City, and placing her under the wing of Thomas Massey of the Massasoit House. You know him, of course?"

"Yes; a good, true, reliable fellow, and about the only intimate friend Laxton had in town," was the grave response.

"Good enough," though there was a faint twinkle in his gray eyes as he read the real meaning of that gravity. "I had to promise, of course, though it seemed like closing a grave to leave the wounded man all alone by himself."

"You fear his hurts are mortal, then?"

"Hardly one chance in a thousand, to speak bluntly," his brows corrugating, a reddish glimmer flashing into his eyes as their lids quickly drooped. "But that one chance is worth fighting for, and I was to find Dr. Grable and make all possible haste back to the cabin with him."

"And I've caused you to lose so much time!"

"It hardly counts," with a faint sigh. "I never expect to see the man alive. But—will you escort the young lady to Sodom, and pick up the doctor, while I go back to help the poor devil, if it isn't too late for that?"

Evenly though the words issued from his lips, Grip-sack Sid listened with burning anxiety for the answer, even though he knew it could hardly be contrary to his wishes.

Although he might be resigning his loved one to the guardianship of a man who frowned upon his suit, in sympathy with his friend, Pitt Laxton, it would be a taste of Heaven before Hades; he would have a long ride in company with his beloved.

"Of course—Inza, little lady!"

The girl was struggling faintly to her feet, and Fred Benight sprang to her assistance. Grip-sack Sid watched them for a little, his strong face telling no tales, but with a softened glow in his keen eyes.

Then he went over to where the horse was standing, bringing it to the side of the trail, speaking quickly:

"You know now what is to be done, Mr. Benight, and I need wait no longer. Of course you will make all practicable speed there and back again?"

Inza gave a little cry, murmuring:

"You are not— You will not desert us, sir?"

"I leave you in good hands, Miss Laxton," with a kindly smile as he warmly pressed her hand. "Mr. Benight will escort you safely to Sodom, and place you in charge of Mr. Massey, then return with the doctor. As for me—I'll run back and cheer up your father."

"If I could—"

"Remember his wishes, my dear child," his voice softened, his eyes even more kind. "You can serve him best by sending him medical aid."

"Quick—let me go!" starting toward the horse in her agitation. "Tell him—for me—"

"Everything you could wish, dear child," muttered Harper, his hands upon her trim waist as he motioned with his head for Benight to mount.

The young man obeyed, and then the detective lightly swung the maiden up behind her lover, striking the horse sharply with the flat of his hand and sending it forward at a goodly pace.

"It's labor spent in vain, so far as Pitt Laxton is concerned," he muttered, with a hard, gloomy frown as he turned back toward the lone cabin, breaking into a steady, swinging stride that was almost as much a run as it was walking. "But the child will fall into good hands, and that is just what she needs the most at present."

For half a mile he maintained that rapid pace, then, as he got his "second wind," he broke into a run that devoured space at a marvelous rate.

He was showing strange eagerness to reach the lone cabin, for one who so firmly believed that death had already claimed its prey.

"And yet—he showed such amazing strength!" flashed through his busy brain as he sped along the winding trail. "He ought never to have drawn a conscious breath after receiving such a terrible wound. And—I'd give my left hand to know that he would pull through!"

There was little love or sympathy or tenderness to be read in those glittering eyes or that stern-set face, though it was easy to be seen that Sidney Harper really meant his extravagant offer.

He maintained his rapid pace, covering the ground fully as swiftly as the best horse could have done, since the trail was more difficult for four than two-legged animals.

With only two brief breathing spells, he covered the distance he had ridden in company with Inza Laxton, and as he drew near to the secluded spot in which Pitt Laxton had built his home, his face grew colder, harder, his eyes to glitter with a still more pitiless light.

Yet he had not the faintest hope of finding other than a corpse awaiting him, and when he turned the curve around which might be obtained a first glimpse of the lone cabin, he drew up with a gasping sound escaping his lips.

In the open doorway of the building stood a human figure, held erect by a hand bearing on either side of the casing, and though its back was turned toward him, as though the figure was just returning to the house, Grip-sack Sid instantly recognized it.

The figure of Pitt Laxton, whom he had deemed cold in death!

CHAPTER XVIII.

GRIP-SACK SID TELLS A STORY.

"HOLY smoke! is it his ghost?"

The words broke involuntarily from the detective's lips as he made this astounding discovery, and not until the figure vanished from view by passing into the house, did he break the spell which had fallen upon him.

"Alive! able to hear what I've sworn to tell him!" panted Grip-sack Sid as he sprang forward, all atremble for the moment, so unexpectedly had this all come about.

Even yet he could not realize it. He had left the man lying on what he firmly believed was his death-bed. He felt that he could not possibly live the hour out. And now—walking! Not only afoot, but evidently having been outside the cabin—how far away?

As he reached the threshold, Grip-sack Sid paused, to brush a hand across his eyes, catching his breath painfully, for he could just catch a glimpse of a male form stretched upon the cot in the other room, seemingly just as he had left Pitt Laxton.

Had it been but a vision, conjured up by his over-wrought brain?

"Who's there?" called out a deep, yet husky voice, and he saw that figure partially rise up, pistol in hand, even as that doubting query flashed across his troubled brain.

"Don't waste powder on a friend, Pitt Laxton!" called out the Grip-sack Sharp, regaining his wonted nerve as by magic.

"It's you?" with a deep breath of relief as Laxton recognized the speaker. "Where's Doc?"

"Coming," laconically replied Harper, crossing over to the other room, keenly, curiously scanning that pale, haggard face. "Feeling heap better, aren't you, pardner?"

"Bad enough, but it might be worse," was the reply, his face contorting as a twinge of pain shot through his wound. "You made mighty quick time. You didn't bring Inza back with you?"

The Grip-sack Sharp shook his head in silence, bending over to note the pulse of the wounded man. It was full and strong, but very rapid, showing some signs of fever.

That was to be expected, of course, but Harper was fairly amazed. If he had not inspected the wound himself, he could never have believed this man had been shot through and through by a ball of heavy caliber.

It was a miracle past his comprehension, and much as he had to say to this man, he was doubly eager for the coming of a medical authority who might be able to explain this seeming miracle.

"How are you feeling, now?"

"Badly enough," with a stifled groan. "I'm stiff and sore, so I can hardly walk. I could hardly make it down to the spring and back, a bit ago."

"Then you really walked that far?"

"I had to," with a grim smile. "I was perishing for a cool drink, and there was no fresh water in the house. I didn't look for you back so soon, or I might have waited. You don't reckon it's hurt me?"

"Your voice don't sound as though it did."

Pitt Laxton shifted uneasily on his bed, casting a glance past the Grip-sack Sharp toward the door.

"Where's Doc? I thought you said he was coming?"

"So he is, by this time, I reckon," replied Harper, abandoning all further attempt to solve the enigma. "I didn't go all the way to Sodom with your daughter, as I met a friend of hers who said he'd attend to all at that end. I reckoned I could do more good here, so came back."

"What friend of hers?"

"A very good one, judging from her readiness to exchange escorts," with a little laugh, as he drew a chair closer to the bed, sitting down and keenly though covertly watching his man. "Doubtless you know him: Fred Benight I think his name is."

Pitt Laxton uttered an oath, starting up in bed, only to be pushed back by the strong hand of his attendant.

"That infernal scoundrel!" panted the wounded man, his face convulsed with fury, though he speedily ceased to struggle against that restraining hand. "You let her go off with Fred Benight?"

"Why not, since they both plainly wished it?" was the cool reply. "The young fellow could place her in charge of your friend and summon the doctor, with men to bear you on a litter to Sodom, fully as well as I could. And I wanted to get back here as quickly as possible."

"You meant well, no doubt, but—"

"I don't see how you can doubt that," smiled Harper, a curious light filling his eyes. "Not that I want to exalt myself, but it's only fact when I say that I risked my own life to save you and yours from those ruffians."

"I know. I'm grateful. Only—if it had been any other!"

"Than Fred Benight, you mean?" asked Grip-sack Sid.

Pitt Laxton nodded assent, his lids closing, his brows contracted.

For the time being his hurts were forgotten. All he could think of was his loved child riding in company with the lover whom he had so harshly driven from his door when he came to plead his suit.

"Inza seemed glad enough to meet him," slowly said Harper, still maintaining that covert watch, now and then gently touching the wounded man's pulse. "She fell into his arms as though he might have been her brother. And—do you know, neighbor, I really didn't blame her?"

Pitt Laxton groaned, smothering an ugly curse at the same time.

"It's plain enough that the young man is no great favorite of yours, Laxton, but knowing him as well as I do, I'm inclined to think you're unjustly prejudiced against him. What wrong has he ever done to you or yours?"

"I hate the cur!" sullenly muttered the wounded man.

"That's where you're 'way off, pardner," nodded Harper, positively. "There isn't a drop of currish blood in the lad's veins. He's a bold, honest, frank, go-ahead fellow, good enough to mate with the proudest lady in all the land."

"Not with Inza—never with my little woman!"

"That rests with you, her and him, of course. But, all the same, I'm open to bet that you can't find better or truer blood in all this section than Fred Benight carries in his veins. Comes by it honestly, too, for a better man than his father—"

Pitt Laxton turned over abruptly, his face toward the wall, a shiver running through his frame as he did so.

Grip-sack Sid smiled briefly, but placidly resumed:

"As I was saying, neighbor, Fred's father was just such another fine young fellow. Pity he was cut off so soon, wasn't it?"

A muttered sound that might have been a groan, a curse, or a grum assent; no more.

"Shall I tell you the story, while waiting for the doctor to come? Since you could hardly have known the poor fellow—did you ever meet him, by the way? Arthur Benight was his name."

"No—I never met him. Doc—will you never come?"

"In good time, neighbor. Remember it's a long ride to town, and the lad may have some trouble in finding the medical sharp. But I'll do my level best to amuse you while waiting."

"About this father of young Fred: Arthur Benight. He was even younger than his son is now when he fell in love with and married a lady friend of mine. That's why I feel such a strong interest in the boy, by the way; but that isn't telling the story of his father."

"Well, Arthur Benight had a bosom friend, as most men have, and he set a mighty store by him, even when he found out that his young wife had taken a strong dislike to the fellow. He thought it a silly prejudice, and laughed at her repeated warnings not to place too much confidence in the fellow."

"By the way, I forgot to mention the name of this bosom friend: he was called Carl Bassett, then, and—my dear fellow!" with strong sympathy in his tones as Pitt Laxton gave a shuddering groan. "Does it hurt you that keenly? Shall I look at your wound again?"

"No—it's all right. If Grable would only come!" groaned the miner, moving restlessly, though still keeping his face turned toward the wall.

Grip-sack Sid smiled grimly, his gray eyes glowing like those of a cat in that subdued light.

"Fred's fetching him by this time, never fear, pardner. But as I was saying: this bosom friend was called Carl Bassett, and in almost every respect he was the direct opposite of Arthur Benight.

"I never met him but once or twice, and then only in passing, so when the tragedy took place, I had to depend on others for a description of the assassin. Another twinge, 'eh?' as the wounded man moved uneasily.

"If I could only be quiet—if I might go to sleep!" panted the tortured man, faintly.

"It's hardly worth while, since Doc must come very soon, and we'd only have to rouse you up to look at your hurt. Better wait until he has patched you up, neighbor, then it'll be all the more binding."

Laxton offered no further plea, and Grip-sack Sid resumed his story, seemingly without a thought as to its being the very reverse of agreeable and soothing to his patient.

"For a foul assassin Carl Bassett proved to be, driving a knife through and through the heart of the man who had loved and treated him as a twin brother, sharing his purse with him and times beyond counting keeping the villain from paying the penalty due his excesses. For he was always hot-headed, and some said that he murdered his friend while in a crazy fit."

"He did! it must have been that way!" groaned Laxton.

"Then you *did* know them both?" with an echo of amazement in his tones. "I thought you said the contrary."

"I didn't know them, but I judge from what you say about the manner in which Benight treated Bassett," Laxton faintly answered.

"There's something in that," nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, seeming to accept the explanation without question. "And yet, for my part, I could never believe in that theory. Everything pointed to a cold-blooded murder, for Bassett robbed his victim after butchering him."

"Well, to cut a long story short, that cowardly knife thrust cut short two precious lives. For not only did it kill Arthur Benight, but his wife, Fred's mother, faded away as the months crept by without bringing the foul assassin to justice, finally dying of grief. And just as surely as he murdered the husband, just so certainly did Carl Bassett murder the wife!"

Pitt Laxton shivered visibly, but he made no further sign. His groans, if any, were smothered in their birth.

"Her last words were to Fred and a friend of hers; never mind his name just at present, though possibly I may recall it after a bit; I'm taken with streaks of forgetting, at times, you want to know!"

"Well, as I set out to say, her last words to Fred were for him to never let that hunt for vengeance die out: for him to spend his whole life if needs be in the chase for the foul assassin. And when found, if ever, Carl Bassett was to be taken back to the scene of his crime, and there made to do full expiation on the gallows!"

Sidney Harper paused as though his story was complete, but Pitt Laxton made no comment. He lay with his face turned to the wall, breathing fast and heavily, plainly suffering intensely.

The Grip-sack Sharp watched him for a brief space, his gray eyes filled with a sternly avenging fire, his strong hands closing and unclosing as though terribly tempted to fall upon that shoulder and claim their long sought for prey.

But the right hour had not yet struck, and lest that horrible temptation should overcome even his iron will, the avenger abruptly pushed back his chair, rising to his feet and turning toward the outer door, muttering something about looking for Dr. Grable.

But then, with a sharp cry, he leaped forward and slammed the door to, just in time to bar the entrance of Dry-throat Johnny and his mates.

CHAPTER XIX.

TONGUE AGAINST TONGUE.

DRY-THROAT JOHNNY MCGEE seemed fully as eager to obey orders as Captain Arch-angel was to issue them, at least as long as that thoroughly excited individual was within tongue-reach; but when once fairly out of his sight, the Seraph of the big mustache and ruby nose paid more attention to the spirit than to the letter of those commands.

He did look up Gypsy Joe Jack, but instead of setting off with him as sole companion for the lone cabin in the hills, he extended the invitation to Policy Pete Huck and several others of the Seraphs, probably because it would be too much trouble to draw the dark-visaged ruffian from their ranks without rousing their ugly suspicions concerning a "soft snap" being on the docket.

"If the old man tries to kick, just say we struck you in the hills, and he'll never know the

differ," coolly observed Dry-throat Johnny, as he bade the rascals make the best of their way out of town, to rendezvous at a certain well-known point. "Dollars to cents he's hunting his own hole in a holy rush, this minute!"

"What sort o' critter kin it be, to faze the boss?" wonderingly ejaculated one of the ruffians.

"Git him on your trail, an' you won't need anybody to tell you that," grimly nodded the present head of the gang, then hurrying away in company with Gypsy Joe Jack for his only companion.

As it was out of the question to mount all the squad, more than half of whom were reputed dead-beats and bummers of the first quality within the limits of Sodom City, however they ranked when flourishing as Seraphs, it consumed considerable time in covering the distance lying between the two points.

It might have taken still more, however, had they not been joined by Fire-top Finney himself, while yet at a considerable distance from their destination.

It did not take that lively-tongued rascal long to tell his story, particularly as he skipped all that part relating to the miner's visit to his secret bonanza; and as they learned of the almost certain death of Calipers Tick, the gang rushed forward with a howl of vengeance.

Fire-top explained his escape with life from the half-dozen desperadoes who had jumped them so inopportunely, to his own satisfaction when the first fury of that rush subsided. He declared that Pitt Laxton was dead, and he had hardly a doubt but that they would find the cabin deserted by all save, possibly, a corpse or two.

Then why their eager advance?

"It's our bounden duty to investigate the affair as thoroughly as possible," grimly decided Dry-throat Johnny. "And if we chance to stumble over any clew to the big bonanza—well, so much the better for the Family!"

Fire-top Finney joined in the subdued but enthusiastic cheer which followed this speech, but his memory must have been seriously affected by his recent terrible encounter with that horde of desperadoes, for he never once let a hint drop as to that curious crevice lying hidden beneath the slab of rock under the clump of bushes.

If he had not placed such implicit confidence in the story told by Fire-top Finney, Dry-throat Johnny McGee would hardly have made his approach to the lone cabin so openly, and he might not have been so utterly taken aback when he caught sight of a male figure just as it swung the heavy slab door shut, almost in their faces.

"Hellow, here, open up, you!" he spluttered, even as he recoiled.

"There's nobody at home, gentlemen," coolly answered Grip-sack Sid as he dropped the massive oaken bar into place, bracing the stout door so firmly that it would stand quite a siege.

"Fire and brimstone! who the foul fiend are you?"

"Call me pet names, darling!" sung the Sample Sport, casting a keen and wary look around him as he felt of his tools.

He could see but two small windows, and each of these had their heavy shutters closed and fastened, just as they had been the night before. And even if there should prove to be such tiny loops as may be looked for in log huts of the "stick-and-daub" order, the inside gloom would prevent anything like a certain shot.

"I'll call ye to Limerick if you try to come any of your funny rig-a-ma-doodle on me!" savagely growled McGee, hammering on the door with his clubbed revolver. "Open up, or down goes your meat-house!"

"Button up, Johnny; you'll wake the baby!" squeaked the Grip-sack Sharp in a shrill, feminine voice, coolly pursuing his investigations, knowing that he would hardly have as good an opportunity when once the enemy had fairly recovered from their first check.

"Begone, youimps of Satan!" cried out Pitt Laxton, in sudden fury as he rose to a sitting posture in bed. "Haven't you worked enough mischief, already? Go—let me die in peace!"

Grip-sack Sid wheeled at the first word, throwing out a warning hand, but as Laxton failed to take the hint, he stood in resigned silence, awaiting what might follow.

There was no immediate response from the evil gang without, though Harper could hear them muttering eagerly as they tramped before the closed door. Then, in an altogether changed voice and manner, Dry-throat Johnny made himself heard:

"It was all a sad, a terrible mistake, Laxton, and I've come here to make what amends lies in my power."

"Lies fits in so neatly, don't it?" laughed Harper.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?"

"Captain Arch-angel, high-muck-a-muck of the Seraphs of Sodom—devil a less than that'll I ever own to, be-dad!"

"Laxton, are you held a prisoner by that glib-tongued rascal?"

"Laxton's dead, and his spirit has just flown

up the chimney. And that ought to be answer enough for a hog! Grunt if it don't suit you."

There was a brief silence outside, as though even Dry-throat Johnny felt wholly at a loss how to deal with this mocking guardian on the safe side of the door.

Swift, noiseless as a cat, Grip-sack Sid crossed the room and bent over Pitt Laxton as he lay back on the bed, shivering fitfully.

"Is there any way of commanding the path to the door without opening either door or window?" he hastily whispered. "If so, I'll go bail those rascals will get mighty tired before downing us!"

"I say, Pitt Laxton!" called out Johnny McGee, making his tones as winning as possible.

"Let me do the chinning, pardner," whispered Harper; then imitating the tones of the miner with marvelous accuracy: "Will you never go? Haven't you worked harm enough, devils?"

"But it was all a mistake, don't you see, dear fellow? And we've brought a doctor to look at your hurts. Don't throw away your only chance, man alive! Open up—and—"

"Have opened up—the finest line of samples mortal eyes ever gazed over with a wish for a pocket long as the moral law, ram-jammed chuck full to the brim with ducats, and every one of them fairly itching to swap themselves for goods such as— But what use? Tongue can't enumerate their virtues, and eyes have to look twice over before catching even a dim and misty photograph of their marvelous beauties!"

"I tell you the doctor—"

"Is mighty good-looking, but he can't come in—some other eve, Johnny! Or, coming down to bald-headed United States lingo, it won't wash worth a cent."

"Are you crazy, you infernal ass?"

"I would be if I let a rival runner chisel me out of a fat customer; but that isn't the way Our House trains its representatives. Oh, no, Johnny Sweet-lips! don't you think it for a cent. Just hang yourself up on a peg until I've finished my list, then I'll let you look at the cover before I mail it by telegraph—see?"

It may be doubted whether Grip-sack Sid knew just what sentences his trained tongue was uttering, for his amazed eyes were watching the actions of Pitt Laxton, who had crawled from his bed and steadying himself for a breath by the casing of the door between the two rooms, then crossed over to the side of the front door.

With his sunken yet glowing eyes fixed on the face of his companion, the miner pointed out a couple of loop-holes fashioned through the logs, though now closed by neatly-fitting plugs of wood. One of these was on either side of the door, and the Grip-sack Sharp nodded with a grim smile as he realized how, by their means, even a single man could command the approach to the door.

Whatever sounds the wounded miner might have made while thus engaged, were covered by the voice of the Sample Sport, and the outlaws without could hardly have suspected the truth.

"What do you take us for, curse ye?" growled McGee, plainly wrought up to fury by that glib tongue. "Who are you, anyway? Why don't you let Laxton answer for himself?"

"Because you make him weary, Johnny Sweet-lips. Because he hates a liar almost as much as I adore one, and—for pity of Saint Paul!" assuming a tone of wailing reproach as he added: "Turn your head the other way and quit breathing through the key-hole! Man, man, have you been breakfasting with *Mephitis Americana*, Johnny?"

"Open up or—down with the door, lads!" howled Dry-throat Johnny, wrought to fury by that mocking tongue.

The cabin, stout-built as it was, fairly shook before that heavy shock, but the door withstood it nobly.

"You're mighty good-looking, but you can't come in!" chanted the Grip-sack Sharp, rendering the old song doubly exasperating to the ears of those who began to realize how truth it was, just then.

"But we *will* come in, curse you!" fumed McGee, breathing hard after his desperate efforts. "And when we do—you'll pay the penalty!"

"And you'll receive it—in cold lead, Johnny o' the Honey-tipped tongue!" laughed the Sample Sport, carelessly.

"Pitt Laxton! I want to talk with you, in person."

The wounded miner cast an inquiring glance toward Harper, who nodded permission to answer that summons.

"What do you wish to say to me, you ruffian?" asked Laxton, in a tone whose steadiness amazed the Grip-sack Sharp.

"That you might as well come down, first as last. Warren Gilchrist knows how you tried to break bail, and he sent us after you. Open up and cheese this folly, or you'll sup sorrow for it in the end!"

Grip-sack Sid was beside the wounded man, a hand closing firmly over his lips, his own adroit tongue stealing the injured man's voice with which to answer that threat:

"Tell Warren Gilchrist from me that I defy him, from start to finish! Say that if he wishes

to see me, to come in person; but to put his worldly affairs in order first, for I'll kill him on sight!"

"That does settle it!" snarled Dry-throat Johnny, apparently without in the least suspecting that cunning counterfeit. "The boss told us to take you, for breaking the bond you gave him. We'll do it, living if we can, dead if you'll have it that way!"

"Ob, button up!" drawled Harper, in tones of languid disgust, then adding in brisker tones: "We're not of the dying sort, Dry-throat Johnny, and I'm a shining example if you want one. You sent me to look up the Old Boy, through his Soup-bowl, but I went through the boiling and came out heap sight tougher than when I took that header."

A savage oath from the big Seraph proved that he had at last recognized the speaker, and in the fury of his discovery, he hurled himself madly against the closed door.

"Oh, g'way you!" disgustedly cried the Grip-sack Sharp, seeing no further advantage to be gained by holding the enemy in play. "I'm tired of chinning, and the lady wishes to sleep. Skin out, or I'll open the door and spank the whole outfit with my slipper!"

"Out o' the way, Johnny!" cried a savage voice, and a moment later the stout door shook and groaned before a heavy shock.

Gypsy Joe Jack was leading the Seraphs with a battering-ram.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SERAPHS GROW DESPERATE.

GRIP-SACK SID sprang to the nearest loop, wrenching out the cunningly fitted plug, showing an opening through which he could easily command the front of the cabin.

He saw half a dozen ruffians bearing a log between them, just on the point of dashing its butt against the door for the second time.

With marvelous rapidity he picked his men and fired two shots, drawing forth yells and oaths of mingled pain, surprise and fury as the log was dropped to the ground.

"I'm just playing, now, gents," laughed the sport as he thrust the plug back into place. "Next time I'll shoot to kill!"

His last words were almost drowned by a storm of shots from the maddened ruffians, only one or two of them breaking through the heavy door. And as he leaped across to the other loop, Grip-sack Sid was just in time to catch a glimpse of the Seraphs in full flight, plunging into or behind the nearest cover.

He sent one bullet searching for the portly figure of Dry-throat Johnny as that worthy dove headlong into a mass of scrubbery, then closed the loophole with a light, careless laugh.

Pitt Laxton was leaning against the door-casing between the two rooms, his face ghastly white, a hand pressed over his heart. A curious light leaped into the keen gray eyes of the Grip-sack Sharp as he noted this action, and taking the wounded miner by the arm, he led him back to his bed, gently forcing him to lie down.

He opened the cut garments, expecting to find that secondary hemorrhage had set in, but drew a long breath of mingled wonder and relief as he found nothing of the sort. More than ever did that wound puzzle him, but he began to think that he would never solve the mystery in this world.

"Next time, pardner, be sure to build your house of stone, and roof it over with the same, unless you prefer dirt as a covering," he said, sweeping his gaze around the rudely squared logs.

"What do you mean by that?" faintly asked Laxton.

"That two and two makes four when you join them together, pardner. Or, if you haven't time to figure it up, that those gentle creatures, finding that they can't get in, will take hot measures to drive us out! Sabe, pard?"

"You mean?" faltered Laxton, starting up on an elbow, his eyes growing wider at that dread thought.

"A genuine house-warming—no less!" was the grim response.

Laxton gave a low cry of dismay, for now he fully comprehended what his strange guest was driving at.

"You mean they'll fire the cabin?"

"Just that, unless—well," with a swift glance into that haggard face as he slowly added: "Well, there's just one hope for us."

"And that chance—if it is a chance?"

"Lies in the Secret Bonanza."

Pitt Laxton started violently, one hand mechanically seeking the pistol which protruded partly from his pocket, his face turning, if that could be, even more ghastly than ever as he stammered:

"What—what do you know about—I don't comprehend!"

"I know only what you told me, pardner," with a slight smile.

"How—what—"

"Possibly while you were delirious from the effects of your wound," quietly interposed the Grip-sack Sharp, bending his ear in listening like one who has caught a suspicious sound from without. "Let that be as it may, I know

all about your secret bonanza, and of the store of gold you have laid by in the cavern near Satan's Soup-bowl. 'Twill make a fine start in life for Fred Benight and his charming bride, don't you—"

The sentence was left incomplete, for at that moment a red glow came streaming into the darkened chamber, and a pistol-shot echoed through the room, the bullet fairly grazing the cheek of the Grip-sack Sharp as he sat facing the wall.

Swift as thought his right hand rose, to send a bullet into the smoke, and snap-shot though it was, a muffled howl of angry pain came to their ears, followed by the hasty trampling of heavy feet in flight.

Grip-sack Sid caught a blanket from the bed and hung it over the wall where the hole had been picked through the chinking. Then he resumed his seat in silence, gazing curiously into the scared face of the wounded miner as he lay on the couch.

For a few moments silence reigned, then Sidney Harper broke it with a grim laugh as he coolly uttered:

"That faint hope has gone glimmering, pardner, and I'm open to lay almost any odds that inside an hour you and I will be ready to accept death in exchange for a single whiff of pure air!"

"You think?" faltered Laxton, faintly.

"I know," with a curt nod. "If those devils were ignorant of it before, they are aware now that Miss Laxton is absent. That rascal did not try his teeth until after he'd made full use of his eyes. And as long as the girl lives, they have little use for you. So—I told you so, neighbor!" with a short, hard laugh as there came to their nostrils an unmistakable scent of acrid smoke.

Grip-sack Sid looked to his pistols, rising from his seat and passing into the other room. Listening for a few moments at the front door, he felt reasonably sure that the fire had not been kindled in that quarter, and then ventured to remove one of the plugs from a loop.

He waited for a little before trying to peer forth, not knowing but what keen and vengeful eyes were fixed upon that precise point, ready to send a death-shot through the opening. But as no sign followed the slow passage of his vacant hat before the hole, he applied his eye, sweeping it over the extent of ground thus commanded.

He could see naught of the Seraphs, but a few curls of blue smoke were eddying around the cabin, plainly testifying to the desperation of their foemen.

He was about to close the loop-hole, as some of the acrid smoke began circling around to steal inside, when he was arrested by the loud, stern voice of Dry-throat Johnny McGee:

"I say, you rats in the hole?"

"Say on, McDuff, and double-dee'd be I if you don't get heap more'n enough," cried Harper, at the same time striving to catch a glimpse of the portly Seraph, but in vain.

"The cabin is on fire. Yield or roast!"

"We don't know how to yield, and we can't roast; we're thoroughbred salamanders, Johnny-tumble-down!" mocked the reckless sport. "But if you're actually spoiling for cooked meat, come over here all by your lonesome self, and we'll take pleasure in doing you to a turn."

"You're talking to keep your courage up, but pretty soon you'll be singing a far different tune," laughed the ruffian, viciously.

"The doxology, over your beautiful corpse, Johnny-keep-lying. Now button up, please. I'm sleepy, and want to take a little nap."

Satisfied that the Seraphs had no intention of granting him a shot at any of their precious persons, Grip-sack Sid closed the loop, turning toward Pitt Laxton, who was sitting on the edge of his bed.

Even with such a hideous death staring them in the face, Sidney Harper could not but feel fresh wonder every time he looked at the wounded miner, recalling how surely that heavy bullet had passed completely through his body, hardly an inch, at most, from the point of his heart; a wound such as few men survived, even for an hour.

Yet Pitt Laxton seemed to gather fresh strength with each minute that passed, and now, as he rose to his feet, he moved as firmly, as steadily as ever in all his life.

"The fire is beginning to show through," he said, with a motion toward the wall through which that almost fatal shot had been fired.

"And sends its card in advance," looking at the spirals of bitter smoke stealing through the openings left by the rude chinking dropping out as the heat increased.

"Thank God! Inza is safe from all this!" fervently uttered the miner. "Massey will protect her from that cursed demon!"

"And Fred Benight will shield her with his life," slowly added Harper, smiling grimly as he saw how Laxton shrank at that name. "As for us—listen!"

"I say, you cursed idiots!" came the loud voice of Johnny McGee. "The roof is catching, and you'll mighty soon have to break cover. Just to encourage you, I'll add that we're going

to make sifters out of your bodies the instant you leap through the doorway!"

The two men thus threatened interchanged stern glances. Laxton impulsively held out his hand, but Harper slowly shook his head.

"I can't take your hand in that spirit, Carl Bassett. But if we pull through this scrape with life, I'll offer you my hand—with a hangman's noose between my fingers."

"God above!" gasped the wounded miner. "Who are you?"

CHAPTER XXI.

RED SPURS AND BURNING POWDER.

FRED BENIGHT'S brain grew dizzy as the horse sprang forward under the impulse of Sidney Harper's hand, and it was more to the credit of the animal than its rider that they kept to the main trail for those first few rods.

With the arms of his loved one clinging tightly about him; with her soft cheek pressed against his shoulder; knowing that they were alone together, free to say or do as they chose, without fear of interference or harsh interruption.

But his sober senses came back to him as he caught the half-stifled sob that broke from the lips of the poor girl, for it recalled to his mind the tragic tale so curtly told by the stranger whom he had so narrowly escaped shooting as a wicked kidnapper.

Of its own accord the doubly laden horse slackened its pace to a more moderate as well as agreeable one, and Fred Benight did not seek to argue the matter with their equine friend. Instead, he turned in the saddle sufficiently to make conversation with Inza easier and at the same time far more satisfactory; since he was enabled to steal one arm about her lithe waist without too greatly endangering their stability.

For days past, the love-lorn young fellow had been lurking 'round in vague hopes of securing an interview with the girl whom he loved almost to distraction. Only regard for her peace of mind had kept him from boldly calling at the cabin from which Pitt Laxton had driven him with bitter curses and savage threats, for as Sidney Harper took occasion to assure the wounded miner, there was not a drop of cowardly blood to be found in the young man's veins.

Fear for himself would never have kept him back a minute, but he feared for poor Inza; though he may have done Pitt Laxton injustice on that point, he felt certain that the hard-faced father would visit his resentment on the head of his daughter.

It was in this longing hope of securing a word or two with the idol of his strong young heart that led to Benight's being afoot and so far from town at such an early hour; and with lovely reserve he had taken to cover the instant he caught the echo of hoof-strokes, mentally praying that it might be Pitt Laxton on a journey to Sodom City.

He quickly recognized the horse, and then he recognized one of its riders: the pale, sorrow-marked face of Inza Laxton. He saw the tears still damp on her face, and jumping to the conclusion that she had been stolen from home by that grim-faced stranger, he attempted her rescue.

All this Fred Benight managed to explain to his lady-love, and if he punctuated his sentences with kisses, that may be overlooked, so long as the lady herself raised no serious objections. But, after all, it was something like saluting a photograph, if the truth must be told.

Dear as she loved Fred Benight, poor Inza was too utterly filled with grief and anxiety just then for lovely ardor. She had thoughts only for her father, lying wounded nigh unto death, left alone in the desolate cabin shadowed by those grim hills, at the mercy of whatever, whoever might chance to visit him.

Hardly responding to his ardent kisses, the poor child sobbingly begged Fred to hasten, that he might the sooner take medical aid to her father.

Thus it came about that Sodom City was gained by the couple without the young man's gaining anything like a complete or clear history of that night's dark work; but he knew enough to act with something like intelligence.

Just before reaching Sodom City, Fred Benight dismounted, turning the right-side-stirrup over the saddle to shorten the leathers enough to fit Inza, then gently lifting her into the saddle itself. Thus, though the seat was of the masculine pattern, with only a single horn, the maiden found it comfortable and secure enough, as thus arranged.

Leading the animal by the halter, trotting nimbly by its side, one hand clasping that of the girl, Fred Benight entered Sodom City, halting only when in front of the Massasoit House.

Thomas Massey, the landlord, a portly, honest-looking fellow who had crossed over to the shady side of the dividing line of life, came bustling out to greet the daughter of his old friend, and with a few hasty words of explanation Fred Benight resigned Inza to his fatherly care.

"You'll tote him here, of course?" said Massey, lifting the maiden from the saddle. "Get

to—my share of it! Hunt up Grable—I'll find the fellows to lug the litter—see?"

Neither of the two men noticed the man who stood so close to them during this brief interchange, nor did Thomas Massey pay particular attention to him as he followed closely behind while the landlord was half leading, half carrying Inez Laxton into the hotel.

He was a man little likely to excite attention, however, being of medium size, ordinary build, with no remarkable features about him whatever.

So far as outward looks went, he might be a merchant from a little country town, or he might be a matter-of-fact tourist, in search of the material rather than the picturesque or romantic. In short, he might be anything—but precisely what he was.

Fred Benight hurried away in quest of Doctor Grable, denying himself even a parting word with Inez Laxton, while he left Massey to make arrangements for securing litter-bearers, in case Pitt Laxton should be found still alive and in fit condition for journeying so far.

It took longer to find the worthy medico than Benight had calculated upon, early as the hour was, but when he had cornered him, Grable instantly agreed to make the trip, hastening away to secure his horse, promising to be at the Masasoit as quickly as Benight himself.

Thomas Massey had been as good as his word, and Benight found four stout fellows, all armed, each one supplied with a substantial blanket for making the litter, and each with a good horse for the trip.

"And Miss Laxton, Massey?" hesitated Benight.

"In bed, with my old woman keeping guard over her—no less!" was the blunt response, lowering his voice as he added: "Sorry, lad, but it's hands off until her pap lifts the embargo. He sent her to me, and you can't blame a fellow for making his trust good?"

"Tell her—I'll do all that mortal man can to save his life," muttered the lover, as he turned away to spring into the saddle, just as Doctor Grable came ambling up on his steed.

With a gesture that made the others follow after, Fred Benight set off at a brisk trot, quickly reaching the confines of Sodom City, his face set in the direction of the lone cabin among the hills.

So bitter were his thoughts, so absorbed was his brain with his heart-trouble, that Fred Benight might never have noticed the little sleight-of-hand performance which took place just at the edge of Sodom City: the substitution of one man for another: only for the restless eyes of the little Scotch-terrier-like doctor.

"I say, Benight, what's that mean?" bustled Grable, calling attention to the change. "Wringing in a cold deck on us, eh? Some skull-duggery in the wind now?"

"That's all right, doctor," coolly called out the individual indicated: who was none other than the ordinary looking man whose curiosity has already been alluded to. "T'other fellow thought he had a mighty soft snap when I offered him five chucks for his chance of a skrimmage, and if we're both satisfied, you needn't kick. Eh, Benight?"

"Who and what are you?" sternly demanded Fred, hand on pistol, as he reined alongside the cool stranger.

"Don't lose time and ground, my dear sir," purred the other, showing no uneasiness whatever. "If my explanation fails to satisfy you, you can scatter my brains over the rocks half a mile nearer Pitt Laxton's cabin just as well as here—not?"

At the same time he thrust a small bit of pasteboard into the hand of the frowning youth, containing a name and a brief descriptive line, the action hardly breaking his glib flow of words.

"Fact is, you see, I'm bumming about in search of excitement, and such diversion as may be picked up without too much exertion. And as I chanced to see you come in with the young lady—"

"Careful, you!" frowned Benight, flashing a glance from that card into the face of its owner.

"Careful goes, and—as I was saying, dear sir! I caught the name of an old friend and side-partner: the Grip-sack Sharp, he's better known in Sodom City, I find; and as I came here in search of that same Sidney Harper, I reckoned I'd meet him sooner by enlisting under your banner than by waiting for the mountain to come to Mahomet—see?"

And then, without perceptible movement of lips, or ought to show to others the fact that he was speaking, he softly breathed:

"If you must learn more, lead me apart from these gawks!"

Benight was puzzled still. The card was that of a detective, and the name, Mack Souders, was entirely unknown to him.

"Follow me, then," he muttered, impulsively, spurring forward, with the stranger close to his side, calling aloud: "I reckon it's all right, friends, and we'll make up for lost time now!"

"Thanks, awfully," said the stranger, in tones just loud enough for his immediate companion to catch, as they sped swiftly along the

winding trail. "I'm a detective, here on business. Harper is my present chum, and we're here to break up or run down the gang known as the Seraphs of Sodom. Is this satisfactory?"

"If true—yes!" nodded Benight, but with a warning gleam in his honest blue eyes. "All the same, I'll keep an eye upon you, and if I catch you playing foul—good-by, Mack Souders!"

"So mote it be!" laughed the detective, good-bumoredly.

Fred Benight kept his little party riding with hot spurs, knowing how much a single minute might mean to one as sorely injured as he had been led to believe Pitt Laxton was, but though they did not spare horse-flesh, the difficult trail served to greatly lengthen their journey, so to speak.

And while still quite a distance from their destination, Fred Benight gave a startled cry, as his restless eyes noted a column of smoke ascending ahead of them, evidently from a fire kindled very close to the spot where the lone cabin stood.

Of course this might not mean anything serious, but it caused him to redden his sharp spurs once more, calling to his men to hasten, and to see that their tools were ready for work in case of need.

"It's hardly that, I reckon," coolly uttered Mack Souders, as he kept pace with the young man. "I don't hear powder burning, and if Grip-sack Sid went back to watch over your friend, be sure he'd be protesting mighty loud against any such monkey-work as that."

Fred Benight made no reply, for only a short distance ahead of them lay a curve in the trail, and when that was once rounded, he knew the cabin would be in plain sight.

Up and around the bend—to utter a savage yell of angry vengeance at the sight of the cabin in flames.

Like an echo came vicious yells from the scattered cover around the cabin, mingling with the defiant cheer that signaled the wide-flinging of the charring door as Grip-sack Sid, closely followed by Pitt Laxton, dashed out into the pure air, pistols in hand, and loudly barking.

"Down them!" thundered Fred Benight, charging upon the demoralized Seraphs. "No quarter to the house-burners!"

Revolvers were cracking briskly on every side, but the outlaws hardly made a show of standing their ground, now that their longed-for prey had fairly broken cover without being scotched, and taking to the broken ground where horsemen could not follow, they fled for dear life.

Fred Benight made a flying leap from the saddle as he dashed by, close to the father of his loved one, and only pausing to give him a cordial cheer, he dashed away in pursuit of the fleeing outlaws, sending leaden messages in advance.

And Pitt Laxton, his ghastly pale face flushing purple as he recognized the young man, flung forward his revolver, only to have it caught fiercely by Harper, who sternly cried in his ear:

"Murderer! would you add son to father and mother?"

CHAPTER XXII.

TAKING A HINT GRACEFULLY.

WITH a choking cry, Pitt Laxton reeled and fell heavily to the earth, so suddenly that Harper's grip was broken before he could make an effort to catch the sinking figure.

"Hallo, here!" spluttered Doctor Grable, tumbling from his panting pony with true professional zeal as he recognized his patient. "Get out of the way and let me—so!"

The Grip-sack Sharp stepped aside, casting a quick comprehensive glance around him, taking in the different details with photographic accuracy.

The battle, if such it may be called, was over. The Seraphs had taken to flight, and already the pursuit was growing slack, owing to the difficult nature of the ground. Not all of them, however.

Fire-top Finney lay in a slowly growing pool of blood, his earthly career at an end, while at least one other Seraph was shivering with mental and physical agony, though as yet hidden from the view of his enemies.

That same glance showed him Mack Souders, busily engaged in reloading his revolver, and as their eyes met, the Grip-sack Sharp made a slight gesture that caused the detective to turn carelessly away.

"What's the prospect, think you, doctor?" asked Harper, watching the busy hands of the physician and at the same time trying to read the whole truth in that shaggy face.

"Good, of course," was the brusque response.

"Don't bother!"

Grip-sack Sid frowned, his massive jaws squaring as his teeth came together with an audible click. He put his hands behind him, his sinewy fingers locking together as though only thus they could be kept from claiming the game which he had hunted so long and so far.

Fred Benight came back, panting and flushed from his hot chase of the Seraphs, and Dr. Grable gave him a little milder reception than he had vouchsafed the Grip-sack Sharp, even going so far as to say:

"Of course he'll pull through, man! What's to hinder?"

"But—the bullet passed clear through him, in a line with his heart!" muttered the startled young man as he viewed the hurt, now laid bare for inspection and dressing.

Dr. Grable laughed curtly at this.

"That shows how much you know about it, young fellow! The bullet struck and fractured a rib, but instead of entering the cavity—to speak according to your understanding—it simply glanced around, following the bone, to emerge near the spine."

"Then he isn't—dead?"

"No more than you are. Simply overcome by the shock, coupled with over-excitement and exertion. Granted quiet and good nursing, and I'll guarantee he'll be abroad, sound as ever, inside a fortnight."

How eagerly Sidney Harper listened to this professional opinion, so positively expressed, may be imagined after what has been said of his real relations toward the wounded miner: but he made no sign, other than by the grimly exultant glow in his steel-gray eyes as he turned away from the spot, approaching the spring where Mack Souders had seated himself in the refreshing shade.

"Good-morning, sir," gravely bowed the detective, his face a blank so far as recognition of the man whom he had claimed as his "chum" was concerned. "Hope you came through the fiery ordeal unscathed?"

"That's all right, Souders," with a grim smile of approval. "You needn't play stranger any longer, unless you so prefer through motives of your own."

"Bless you, pard," springing up and cordially gripping the extended hand, smiling broadly as their eyes met. "I never went a cent on disguises or mock mystery. It's heap more fun to let your game know you're on his track, and if he's smart enough to fool me—well, he's too good a rascal to be caught in a concealed pit-fall?"

"Every man to his own taste, you know. And now?"

"Ready to report, your Honor," swiftly touching his hat with a military air. "I followed up the clew you pointed out, but found it n. g. Still, my time wasn't altogether wasted, as I trust you will agree. I run across a fellow who might possibly point out the missing link to you."

Mack Souders was closely watching the face of his superior while speaking, but even his keen and trained eyes failed to note any change whatever, and not feeling fully assured as to the nature of the ground he was standing upon, he felt his way still more carefully.

"Of course I'm not altogether vouching for his truth, Harper, but from something the fellow let drop, it's barely possible that the missing link might profitably be looked for somewhere near Sodom City."

"You let the fellow know what you were trying to get at, then?" coldly asked the Grip-sack Sharp.

"Scarcely," with just the suspicion of a frown.

"Of course not," with a fleeting smile. "Beg pardon for the slip, pardner. I hardly counted my words before speaking."

"Never mention it, sir," with a light bow. "I've made just such clumsy moves in my time, but not this one; the fellow pumped freely, yet never felt the handle working in the slightest."

"And from what came up under suction, you think the lost link can be picked up in Sodom?"

"There or thereabouts," and Mack Souders cast a glance toward the spot where Doctor Grable, assisted by Fred Benight, was laboring over the still unconscious miner.

"Of course no names were mentioned," mused Harper, thoughtfully.

"Not by me, but this find of mine—if it was a true lead and not a false show—let drop enough to give me a fool's notion that maybe it wouldn't be time wasted if you were to kinder keep an eye on yonder gent."

He nodded slightly toward the group of three, but Sidney Harper could not fail to guess which of the trio he meant by that.

"You mean Pitt Laxton, Souders?"

"That's the way the lead drifted, pardner."

"At the outset, maybe, but you didn't take time to trace it quite far enough," coolly responded the Grip-sack Sharp, his strong face as unreadable as a mask of marble could have been.

"If you say so—reckon I was in too big a hurry," quietly nodded the detective, showing not the faintest trace of mortification.

"I do say so, Souders, and I don't mind telling you why I'm so confident on that point. I know Mr. Laxton, and I know that your fellow lied, either through malice, a hope of pay, or because he didn't know any better."

"Well, I never wholly fancied the mug of the knave. He looked as though lying came far

easier to his tongue than the straight truth," placidly admitted the detective.

"As I started to say, I know Pitt Laxton like a book," quietly added the Grip-sack Sharp. "He is an old friend, for whom I'd cheerfully lay down my life if it was necessary to keep his existence from being cut short."

"He looks that sort of a friend, after a second view," cheerfully nodded Souders. "Shall I beg his pardon for mistaking him for something else, when he wakes up, pardner?"

"No. I wouldn't mention anything about it, if I were you, Mack. In fact, I'd not even let Mr. Laxton suspect that you're a detective."

"All right, boss," with a grim smile, as he lightly brushed a finger across his lips, with such a natural motion that had a score of wary eyes been fixed upon him, not one of them all could possibly have read the full significance of that action.

"In fact, so far from believing the missing link is to be found in this region, I've about abandoned all hopes of finding it at all, though I may take up the trail again, after recruiting a bit in these delightful hills. And—Souders?"

"Yes, boss."

"You struck something better than that false lead, since leaving me. Of course I couldn't have guessed this, if you hadn't cared for me to hit the mark."

"Well, you're right," with a soft laugh at that shrewd compliment from the one who, for the time being at least, he admitted as his superior. "Not that I wanted to crowd out business for sport, but just as a dim hint that when you struck a halting-place, I was ready to chip in with my mite."

"All right, pardner. You fully understand how I stand on the Laxton case. Now for your other discovery?"

"There's no discount on this lead," with a soft laugh as his hands rubbed together cheerily. "It was stumbled over more by accident than through my looking for it, but it's pure gold, all the same!"

"Of what grade, if I may ask?"

"Fit to pay for a high old rope-festival—no less!"

"Who is it?"

"He calls himself Warren Gilchrist, just at present."

CHAPTER XXIII.

PINCHING A PRISONER.

THROUGH all this talk, Sidney Harper had kept an eye on the wounded miner and the two men who were working over him, and just at this juncture he saw Pitt Laxton show signs of returning consciousness.

In a measure anticipating what would surely follow, the Grip-sack Sharp turned abruptly away from his brother detective, leaving that worthy individual not a little bothered by the sudden move.

"Steady, old man!" he softly warned himself. "Find out how much of that belongs to W. G. before you talk too loud!"

But for once the astute man-hunter was wrong in his instincts; Grip-sack Sid was not giving a thought to Warren Gilchrist nor to the possible discoveries which Mack Souders might have made concerning that human bull-dog.

He knew that Pitt Laxton, just recovering from those repeated shocks, would be almost sure to raise an outcry if he was to waken to see Fred Benight beside him, and in hopes of removing the young man and thus avoid an unpleasant scene, Harper strode forward.

"You—you sneaking cur!" gasped Laxton, his eyes falling upon that handsome face the first thing. "Bring back my little girl, or—"

"Miss Laxton left in my company, you remember, neighbor," quietly interposed the Grip-sack Sharp, only his keen, magnetic eyes speaking far plainer than his tongue. "She is safe with your friend, in town. I will answer for that, if you ask a guarantee."

"And I'll back it up," briskly cried Doctor Grable, picking up his case of implements. "If I didn't see her myself, I came next thing to it; and we're ready to tote you direct to her plump arms, old fellow! Came here riding a streak of lightning, for that express purpose, expecting to find a moribund. Instead—you're in better case to run a foot-race from here to Sodom than one-half of our party, sir! Yes, sir! You are—upon my honor as a professional gentleman, sir!"

Sidney Harper touched Fred Benight on an arm and drew him to one side, while the voluble doctor was engaging his irritable patient.

"Humor him, my lad," he said in low tones. "He'll come 'round when he's had time to digest it all, never fear."

"You know—how it stands, then?" hesitated Benight, still at a loss just how to take this peculiarly-acting stranger.

"Well enough to pass my earnest word to this effect: give the father rope for one week, and then see how carefully he'll keep out of the path to—well, if not exactly glory, no doubt you consider it ten thousand times better and sweeter."

"I say, Doc!" cried Mack Souders, at this point, coming forward with a brisk, bustling air that set well upon his shoulders. "Hope you haven't emptied your pill-boxes and wasted

all your powders, for I've run up against a poor devil over yonder in the brush, not quite dead. Maybe you can finish—I mean be of some use to him, of course!"

Dr. Grable had lived too long in a mining-camp to gibe at a slur, and with true professional eagerness he trotted off after his guide, finding a trembling, shivering, groaning wretch lying under cover of a dense clump of bushes.

Beyond a doubt he had formed one of the band of outlaws, though no sooner did he see those curious eyes upon him than he began to protest his perfect innocence of all save "playing in mighty hard luck!"

"I was jest goin' by, on a prospect, when a bullet hit me an'—"

"Fractured your leg—precisely," nodded Dr. Grable, rubbing his hands briskly as his terrier-eyes quickly summed up the amount of injuries.

"Steady, now! Benight?"

"At your service, doctor."

Grip-sack Sid covertly touched Mack Souders on a hand, then turned away in the direction of the little spring which had supplied the lone cabin with drinking water.

"Then that isn't his name, pardner?" he asked, just as though that former conversation had suffered no break.

"It's the one he passes by in Sodom City, but I hardly think he was christened that way," cautiously replied Souders.

"Are you open to make a bargain pardner?"

"After my contract with you runs out—yes."

"Suppose we put a wheel within a wheel, and see how that works," smiled the Grip-sack Sharp, sinking into the rustic seat under the leafy boughs. "You've struck a lead. I've one of my own. What's to hinder us working those different leads on our own hook?"

"Nothing, if you'd rather have it that way," was the quick response.

"Call it a bargain, then. Each will work the lead that suits his fancy best, wholly independent of the other, unless that other should need and call for aid, or the two trails blend into one. How's that?"

"It couldn't suit me better," nodded Souders, with a grim smile.

"And now, in return for your report, maybe I can give you a drop or two of information. Does your lead point directly to the Seraphs of Sodom?"

"Not on the surface, at least," was the prompt reply.

"Well, you may not need the hint, then, but all the same I'll give it. Warren Gilchrist is certainly mixed up with that gang, and I'm more than inclined to believe that he's Captain Arch-angel in person."

"He's equal to it, anyway," softly laughed Souders, showing no surprise at this revelation.

"All this is his work," with a slight nod that included their present surroundings. "For one thing, he's after the girl for his cub of a son. For another, I reckon he's trying for the secret mine people claim that Laxton has discovered somewhere."

"Then—it might pay to pinch yonder rascals' bit," thoughtfully mused Souders, looking toward the spot where Dr. Grable was attending to the wounded outlaw.

"I had that idea in view when I opened up," nodded Harper. "The first nail is to be driven yonder, and I'll manage it so that you get a fair shake at the fellow, if you care to carry out the scheme."

As a preliminary to keeping this pledge, Grip-sack Sid left his brother detective for the present, passing among the men who had been brought for the purpose of bearing the wounded miner back to Sodom, and thanks to the little earth-covered pit which served as a cellar, preparations were speedily begun for getting up an al fresco meal.

By the time this was done Dr. Grable had completed his work, and at a hint from Harper bustled off to look after Pitt Laxton. A whispered word was also dispatched Fred Benight, thus leaving the wounded outlaw to the tender mercies of Mack Souders.

Grip-sack Sid passed over to where Fire-top Finney was lying, covered over with a branch or two, cast upon his figure by a half-friendly hand. He removed the leafy screen, almost instantly recognizing one of the ruffians who had led him to what seemed certain death, the evening before.

"Your pay came swift and sure, poor devil!" he muttered below his breath as he dropped the cover back again. "Wonder if the others will cash in with as little warning?"

As he turned away he caught sight of a signal from Mack Souders, and promptly answered it in person.

"The fellow is too sulky to use his tongue as chipper as he might, pardner," lightly observed the detective. "Reckon he thinks I'm trying to run a rig on him when I say that I'm an officer of the law."

"What's that to do with me?" sulkily growled the crippled wretch, still clinging to his feeble defense. "I hain't never done nothin' to skeer 'o the law fer, 'less it mought be ketchin' this pesky bullet when I was goin' 'bout my own business."

He broke off with a stifled groan of pain, but Grip-sack Sid bent forward until their eyes met for a moment, then drew erect with a low, amused laugh.

"A saint on ten wheels, aren't you, Policy Pete Huck?"

"Who're you?" faltered the rascal, plainly answering his own question, or his face lied flatly.

"Do you really require an introduction, Peter?" his tones soft and purring as those of a pleased cat. "Shall I send to Battle Junction for a voucher?"

In this case there was magic in a name, judging from the effect that name had on the sulky rascal, and with a gentle laugh Grip-sack Sid drew back a bit, with a wave of the hand as though he was a lawyer turning a witness over to a brother professional.

"I reckon Peter will be able to talk a little, pardner, if you don't rough his hair up too awfully brash."

"I wouldn't hurt even his feelings for a round dollar," blandly declared Souders, as he dropped to his heels, squatting where he could readily watch every and each change in the wounded man's face. "And to set your worst fears at rest, Peter, my lad, I'll agree to stand between the hangman and your precious neck—always provided you make it worth my while."

"What you want o' me, anyhow?" huskily mumbled the scared rascal.

"The simple truth, if it splits your jaws wide open, Peter. I never could endure a liar. The only use I have for one is to send him up a tree, by the loop-line!"

"Peter couldn't lie if he was to try," blandly chimed in the Grip-sack Sharp. "And he'll not try now, for he's smart enough to see that such a course would be a mighty poor policy."

"Now—business, Peter! You belong to the gang known in this section as the Seraphs of Sodom. Don't deny it, or I'll have to call the boys with a lariat as persuader. It's hang or turn state's evidence, my dear rascal."

"They'll kill me ef I peach!" groaned the miserable wretch.

"We'll see that they don't harm you, if you earn the right to such a protection. Now—Warren Gilchrist is at the head of the gang?"

Policy Pete faintly nodded assent, shivering convulsively as his blood-shot eyes roved about him, plainly fearing punishment for his admission. But Mack Souders, now that he had started the opening wedge, knew how to soothe even such a craven, and little by little he drew near to the goal he had set up as a mark.

Policy Pete reluctantly named over fully half a score members of the gang, including Dry-throat Johnny, Gypsy Joe Jack, Parson Thede-Able, Fire-top Finney and Calipers Tick. He admitted that Warren Gilchrist was at the head of the band, and that he occasionally did work under the title of Captain Arch-angel. He also confessed that Oliver Gilchrist was nominally second in command of "The Family."

"It was Gilchrist who sent you after Pitt Laxton, then?" asked Grip-sack Sid, who had listened to this confession with quiet interest.

"So Dry-throat Johnny said," admitted the wounded outlaw.

"What more did he say? Did he have orders to kill Laxton?"

"He said the boss sent him for to help Fire-top an' Calipers, who was left fer to watch over the cabin an' keep 'em from leavin'."

"How long had those two men been on guard duty?"

"All night, I reckon, from what I picked up."

"Why did Gilchrist suspect Laxton of wishing to flee?"

"Reckon they had a row o' some sort yest'day. I can't say fer sure, but that's the 'pression I ketched, somehow."

"What sort of game is Gilchrist playing, anyway?"

"A big one o' some sort, but I cain't tell ye the hull crook and turn o' it, boss, ef ye was to string me up the next minnit!" earnestly declared the prisoner. "I reckon, though, it's 'long o' the big strike folks say Laxton's made somers nigh this."

"In all probability you're right," nodded Grip-sack Sid, drawing back as though perfectly satisfied.

"You won't let on—you won't give 'em a show fer to slug me as a 'former, boss?' tremulously asked the wretch. "Ef they was to dream o' what I've blowed, they'd send me up higher'n a kite!"

"You shall not be injured in the least," was the quick reply. "We will hold you as a prisoner until the work is complete, giving out that you stubbornly swear you know nothing to confess."

With this assurance Policy Pete was forced to be content.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GRIP-SACK SID DROPS A HINT.

By this time, a rather late but all the more welcome meal was pronounced in readiness, provided from the stores found in the out door cellar, and all hands were speedily engaged in feeding.

Even Pitt Laxton, who had apparently en-

tirely recovered from the terrible shock of that heavy bullet, ate heartily under the watchful eye of his physician.

Fred Benight, with true wisdom, kept apart from the little group of which Pitt Laxton formed one, and though that worthy cast many a covert glance toward the youth whom he hated so fiercely, he gave no positive show of breaking the peace.

"You can well afford to wait," said Sidney Harper, who was seated in company with the young man. "You've got the young lady on your side. I'm backing your game. And, though it's poor policy, this blowing one's own bugle, I will say that you might have a worse ally."

"I don't know what I've done to deserve this kindness," hesitated Benight, his eyes curiously scanning that strong face.

"Never look a gift-horse in the mouth, as you value your nose, young man," gravely nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, but with a pleasant twinkle in his keen eyes. "Maybe I'm fishing for an invitation to the wedding, and a chance to trip a toe to the charming bride. Perhaps I'm your fairy godmother, just about ready to turn your pumpkin into a golden chariot and— But that don't pay, does it? You're a different sort o' cat, and so— Call it even and let it went!"

When that late breakfast was over, Dr. Grable broached the forming of a litter, but Pitt Laxton bluntly declared against it.

"I'm able to sit a horse, and yonder is my easiest pacer," with a nod toward the good animal which had taken Inza to Sodom and brought back such timely aid.

Dr. Grable raised no objections to this, frankly admitting that, so far as his injury was concerned, Pitt Laxton was fully able to stand an even longer ride.

"Unless you catch cold in the wound, or overdo the business, you'll experience no ill effects. In a round week you'll have to put on your glasses to find the break."

But the stout blankets supplied by mine host of the Massasoit were not to be entirely wasted. Grip-sack Sid superintended the arranging of a fairly comfortable litter, swung on poles between two horses, and upon this the crippled outlaw was placed. By this means he might be carried to Sodom City without serious danger or even severe pain.

While the litter was being prepared, the bodies of Fire-top Finney and Calipers Tick were given temporary burial. Wrapped in a blanket, they were placed in a hollow, covered over with branches, on top of which heavy stones were placed.

Of course such a thing as a coroner was not numbered among Sodom City's ornaments, but Grip-sack Sid preferred it settled this way, in case the citizens, or any part of them, should desire a regular investigation.

Doctor Grable kept a close if covert watch over Pitt Laxton during the ride back to Sodom, ready to call a halt and insist on an easier method of progression for his patient in case he gave signs of giving out; but nothing of the sort took place.

In fact the miner seemed to entirely forget that he had been injured. That sickening shock had passed away, and it was yet too early for him to experience the soreness which follows such hurts.

Yet, if comparatively easy in body, Pitt Laxton was utterly miserable in mind, as his haggard, sullen, pinched face plainly bore witness.

Once or twice Sidney Harper drew near to blandly ask him how he was bearing the exercise, but the Grip-sack Sharp gave his victim tolerable freedom until the end of that journey was at hand.

His were the strong arms that assisted the wounded miner from the saddle in front of the Massasoit House, and it was his good right arm that helped the other up the flight of steps and into the hotel.

Pitt Laxton's first words were of Inza, his face ghastly pale as he failed to see her on his arrival, but Thomas Massey hastened to reassure him.

"She's right as a trivet, Laxton, and sleeping like a babe in arms, with Mother Massey watching over her. I expect I'll catch a be-old wiggling for not rousing her up at your coming, but I hadn't the heart to break such a blessed sleep; and the old lady swore that if I did, she'd draw a map of seventeen States on my face, too!"

"Madam was exactly right, with your permission, dear sir," blandly bowed the Grip-sack Sharp, still retaining his seemingly supporting grasp on the arm of the wounded man. "Of course it is a trial to our mutual friend, here, not to be so welcomed, but so long as he knows the dear young lady is perfectly well, he can't complain. And—by the way, Laxton, I wasn't quite through with my explanation when those unmannerly rascals chipped in so brash, back yonder."

"I don't—"

"Feel strong, of course," promptly supplemented the other, turning toward Massey as he added: "Mix us a cocktail, landlord, and bring it to the parlor yourself, please. That will be just the stimulant Laxton needs most."

Without giving his enforced companion time

to utter a protest, even if he had dared do so openly, Harper drew Laxton into the back parlor, as it was called by courtesy, seating him on a low lounge at the back of the room.

"There's no use to beat about the bush, pardner," curtly said Grip-sack Sid, standing before his cowering companion, his strong face cold and hard set, his eyes glowing like balls of living fire. "I let out enough of the truth back at the cabin, when death apparently stared us full in the face, to show you that I've fairly run you down."

"I don't—I'm not the man you take me for!"

"You are not the man the world takes you for," coldly amended Harper. "You are Pitt Laxton only by self-dubbing. Your real name is Carl Bassett."

"No—I tell you no!" buskily cried the miner, shrinking away from that pitiless gaze, shivering in every fiber.

"Do you dare me to the proof—before your daughter?" sharply demanded the detective. "Shall I tell aloud the story of Carl Bassett's double crime? Shall I ask why you tried to shoot down Fred Benight from the rear, just when he was risking his life to save yours? Shall I give you a chance to openly prove yourself Pitt Laxton, and thus your complete innocence of that horrible tragedy in Baltimore, by arresting you as that foul assassin?"

"Pity—spare me—for her sake!" gasped the wounded miner, breaking down before that fierce, merciless array of questions, bowing his head upon the pillow and shivering violently.

"I will spare you just so far," coldly added the detective, speaking too low for other ears to catch his words. "I will let you retain your liberty from the present, on condition that you make no effort to flee from Sodom."

"I may not always be within your sight, but you can never escape my grip without my own free will. Though you may fancy your movements are unnoticed, not a step, not a move of yours but what I'll know of it almost as soon as made. You will be watched and spied upon by those whom you least suspect, and if ever you should be idiot or mad enough to neglect this hint—if you try to flee, that very moment you will be openly arrested and charged with murder!"

Pitt Laxton again feebly denied his identity with the criminal Grip-sack Sid was hounding, but the detective paid no attention to the words. And as he heard footsteps drawing near, he hurriedly added:

"Remember—for Inza's sake! Be wise and—hope for the best, while you may!"

Pitt Laxton lifted his head at this sudden change, but Grip-sack Sid was already turned away, to meet Massey with the cocktails. Taking the glasses, he turned back, giving one to Laxton, smiling blandly as their glasses clicked together preparatory to being emptied.

"Don't forget, dear fellow, and good-by until this evening," he cheerily uttered, leaving the wounded miner with an airy wave of the hand.

Thomas Massey bore him company back to the bar, pouring out eager questions as to what had transpired at the lone cabin, but Harper referred him to Laxton for information, pleading important business and literally tearing himself away from the landlord's grip.

Leaving the hotel, Harper passed rapidly down the street, his face impassive but his brain crowded with thought. And it was not until a lithe, threatening form leaped out upon him with an angry yell, that he fully realized where he had wandered to.

"At last, thief, robber, seducer!" savagely cried his assailant, at the same time making a vicious stroke with a knife at his breast. "Give me back my poor wife—my angel Mary!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BULL-DOG IN WAITING.

"Oh, dad-burn the girl! Scorch my shins in double-blazes for ever looking in that direction with anything sweeter than a scowl! She may go to ge-thunder for all o' me—and that's gospel with the bark on!"

Through a tangled lock of wiry hair, which he had purposely pulled down over his brow for that express purpose, the doleful speaker stole a cautious, half-frightened glance toward his sole companion in that gloomy retreat.

A couple of ordinary "star" candles were lighted and stuck to the rude puncheon table by a few drops of their own substance, but these feeble lights only served to "make darkness visible."

Warren Gilchrist was seated at one side of the table, his broad chin and hanging jowls clasped by his hands, joined at the wrists, with elbows supported upon the table. His brows were frowning darkly, almost burying his little eyes. His gaze seemed fixed on vacancy, for it was hardly to be expected that even his keen eyes could pierce the gloom far enough to reach the rough rock wall in that direction.

The elder ruffian made no sound, gave no signs of having heard the discontented plaint of his whelp, and plainly encouraged or emboldened by the sound of his own voice, Oliver Gilchrist added:

"She can go shake, for all me! What've I got by it? Thumps and kicks and bones too sore for any sort o' use! Slaps in the face for

just begging a kiss! And now—get to run off from civilization at half notice, to crawl into a hole cold and damp and musty enough for a coffin to pack paupers in! Curse the girl! Curse the bonanza! Curse everything and everybody!"

"Including the mush-brained idiot who hadn't sense enough to play the cards given him, each one numbered in order!" growled the human bull-dog, at last proving that he owned both ears and tongue.

"That's all right, dad!" muttered Oliver, with a sickly smile, as he pulled his legs further under him, like one who thinks it just as well to be in readiness for a rapid movement in advance or to the rear, as circumstances may render wisest.

"All wrong, you mean!"

"All right, all wrong, then," with a grin. "I wanted to put the last first, but thought you'd raise a howl if I did. So—we'll wipe it all out and begin all over, eh?"

Warren Gilchrist rose to his feet and left the rude table, paying no attention to his son, who shrunk back with a lifted elbow after the fashion of a boy who anticipates a sharp cuff on the ears. He vanished amid the darkness for a brief space, returning with a couple of bottles which evidently contained some sort of strong waters.

He knocked off the head of one of these, drinking from the sharp nozzle as though both his lips and throat were mail-clad, but offering his hopeful none.

"Drink hearty, dad," dolefully whined Oliver, wiping a sleeve across his lips as a gentle hint. "Don't think it's quite as good as the last bottle, do you?"

"Smell of the cork," growled his parent, tossing the neck of the bottle toward him.

"That's all you've earned, of late, and it's all you will be apt to get from me until you change your tactics—unless it might be a thorough flogging!"

"Oh, come off!" disgustedly muttered the young rascal. "What have I done now?"

"It's what you haven't done, rather! If you'd played your cards right, long before this we'd be neck deep in clover, eating like blazes to keep it down from smothering us! Instead of that—where are we?"

"Hiding in a hole, but from just what, or because just why, I'll be jo-hamme ed if I'll ever tell ye!" replied his son, adding with sarcastic humility: "All my fault, of course, and you've just come to keep poor me company."

There was something in this clumsy retort that pleased Gilchrist, or else he deemed it best to alter his demeanor, for he broke into a coarse laugh, pushing the bottle across the table as a silent invitation to Oliver.

"All the same, lad," he said, turning grave once more. "All the same, there's hot and troublous times ahead of us, unless my chart lies most disgustingly. That infernal bloodhound—"

"Is in the soup for keeps!" cut in Oliver, unconsciously forestalling the current slang.

"I don't mean that devil, but another, ten thousand times more to be feared than all the Grip-sack Sharps nature ever put forth!"

"Then—it's some one looking for you dad?" ventured Oliver, curiosity getting the better of his prudence.

There was some ground for his being curious. He had been roused from bed by his father, just as he fairly fell asleep after having "made a night of it," and without being given any explanation had been hustled into his clothes and out of Sodom City, to bring up in this dank, unwholesome place.

That something out of the ordinary had happened, he knew from the unusual manner of his parent, and after standing the suspense at long as he could, Oliver began muttering his discontent, finally making his remarks so pointed that Warren Gilchrist was forced to take notice of them and of him.

"It's some one looking up the whole Family," growled the other, lying with the skill of long practice, and so skillfully that even his cub never once suspected the truth. "And that's why I'm cursing your clumsy botch-work of late. If you'd done your duty, we'd have the big game bagged by now, and be on our road to enjoy the ducats—round millions of them—no less, lad!"

"I did my level best," growled the hopeful sulkily, but before more could be said, a low, tremulous whistle came floating through the gloom, being repeated with a variation after a brief pause, during which father and son crouched in breathless silence, hand on weapon.

Then, as though satisfied that all was right, Warren Gilchrist uttered a sharp cry, which was promptly followed by the entrance of Dry-throat Johnny.

"Well, what luck?" quickly demanded the chief, his evil eyes fairly aglow as he peered into the gloom beyond the portly Seraph. "Where's the others? Where's the girl and Laxton?"

The big outlaw caught up the half-emptied bottle, draining it to the dregs before pausing for breath, though it was evident enough that he sorely needed that essential to life.

"Coming—what's left of 'em, I reckon," he panted, dropping into the seat vacated by Oliver. "As for the girl and Laxton—I'll never tell!"

Gilchrist burst into a torrent of curses, reading something of the truth in that flushed, scratched and bleeding face, together with the tattered clothes, plainly telling of long and hurried flight.

Dry-throat Johnny covertly gripped a revolver, ready to defend his precious life, even against the chief to whom he had sworn allegiance; but beyond that, he sat in grim quietude, waiting for the storm to subside.

Through his mad rage, Gilchrist saw this, and it served to calm him, in a measure, outwardly at least.

"Business! make your report, Seraph."

"Failure, clean through," grimly began Dry-throat Johnny.

"Who was to blame at the start?"

"That's for you to say, after learning the plain facts, captain," gravely responded the Seraph. "I set out as you directed, to join Fire-top and Calipers. I picked up Gypsy Joe, and as he had a few other lads with him, I took them along as the easiest way of getting out of town. To explain, or to draw off Gypsy without explaining, would have cost time, and I'd an idea that might be precious."

"Never mind trifles; get to the essentials," growled Gilchrist.

"We set out, hot-foot. When part way, we met Fire-top who—"

"Curses on the traitor!"

"He's past being hurt by curses, your Honor," came a deep, grave voice from out the darkness, then Gypsy Joe Jack, followed by several other men, came within the circle of light. "Fire-top's cashed in."

"I knew you were busy, chief," apologized another of the band, who had been placed on guard over the entrance to the Retreat. "I could answer for the gentlemen, so brought them in myself."

"Where's Calipers Tick?" he asked, when no more came in review.

"Dead!"

"And Policy Pete Huck?"

"Worse than dead, your Honor," coldly responded Gypsy Joe Jack. "A willing captive in the hands of Mack Souders and the Grip-sack Sharp."

Warren Gilchrist gave a visible start, his florid face blanching to an unhealthy white as he stared at the dark-faced speaker.

"You fully understand what your answer implies, Seraph?"

"I do, and am willing to be judged by the results, captain."

"Go on, then, and give your reasons for charging a brother with a crime that merits, as it must receive, the death penalty."

"Begging pardon, but wouldn't it be better for Dry-throat to explain what happened first? He led us, and it was to him that Fire-top reported. I didn't catch all they said."

Captain Arch-angel turned toward the portly Seraph, with a gesture that bade him speak out in full, and his commands were promptly obeyed.

There is no need to follow Dry-throat in detail. Enough to say that he told a fairly accurate story, for now that Fire-top and Calipers Tick were both dead, he had no incentive to smooth the path for them.

Gilchrist visibly started, and Oliver gave a muffled howl of mingled disgust and doubt when McGee declared that Grip-sack Sid had escaped from Satan's Soup-bowl; but that worthy was not to be shaken in his testimony. He had both seen and talked with the detective.

"I tried a crack at the devil, through a chink, after making sure the girl was not in the cabin, but missed him. The hole wasn't large enough for anything like catching aim, but it was plenty big enough for him to send a pill through—as my cheek will show," gingerly touching a raw wound a little below his eye.

Then, telling how he fired the cabin and stationed his force to shoot down the two men, should they prefer an open dash to being roasted alive, Dry-throat Johnny drew back like one who had nothing more to report.

Gypsy Joe Jack took up the thread, and told how, just as they saw the charring door swing open, a force of mounted men came charging from the rear, shooting as they came. And, caught between two fires, besides being largely outnumbered, they had fled, firing as they ran.

"I saw Fire-top drop, and heard Policy Pete give a yell, as he went down with a broken leg. I didn't wait for more, knowing that the jig was up for that time, at least."

"Have you no better grounds for charging Huck with treachery?" sharply demanded Captain Arch-angel, as Gypsy Joe ceased speaking.

"I have, captain," with a fleeting smile lighting up his swarthy countenance. "I ran, as I admitted, but not quite so far as some others. I knew where there was a snug hole to hide in, and I took my chances, believing it my simple duty to learn something more before I hunted my chief up to report utter failure."

"The pursuit didn't last long, and when mat-

ters simmered down a bit, I crept back, under cover, and succeeded in getting close enough to use my eyes to some purpose."

"I saw Policy Pete under Doc Grable's care, and when his leg was patched up, I saw him talking to those two bloodhounds: Souders and the Grip-sack Sharp, although I couldn't get nigh enough to catch their words. But I could see his face, and that was enough. If not—the detectives treated him like a brother when through talking."

"What do you mean by that?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

YELLOW GOLD FOR RED BLOOD.

"I MEAN that they seemed perfectly satisfied with their little confab. That they fed and gave Peter drink. That they rigged up a horse-litter, placing him upon it as tenderly as though they were handling pure gold. That they took him away toward Sodom, and if you care to investigate, I'll wager my head that you'll find him living like a fighting cock at their expense!"

An ugly muttering came from the assembled Seraphs, and their chief frowned so blackly that his little eyes were completely obscured for the time being.

"It looks black—very black indeed!" he muttered, gloomily. "If he had held out against them, they would have strung him up like a dog with fresh wool betwixt its teeth!"

Gypsy Joe Jack showed his white teeth beneath his jetty mustache, and fell back a pace, like one who feels he has completed his duty.

"Does any one present know anything about this Grip-sack Sharp? Any one knew or heard of him before he struck Sodom?"

"I do, captain," said a lithe, trim-built fellow stepping forward.

His name—or the name by which he was known in Sodom City and to the members of "The Family," was Parson Thede Able. Doubtless the title was given him because of his smooth-shorn, long, grave face, for most assuredly he possessed no other priestly qualifications.

His head was almost square, or rather an oblong with straight lines. His forehead was very low, his eyes deep-set, his nose long and nearly the same size from top to tip, lying close to his face without being flattened. His mouth was wide, straight, thin-lipped, and at first glance it seemed placed in the middle of his face, his chin was so long and massive.

A trifle over the mean height, Parson Thede Able looked a smaller man than he really was. His body, his arms, his legs, all were round instead of flattened, thus making him much heavier than one would suppose at first glance.

Right or wrong, he had the reputation of being even more dangerous than he looked, and few even among the Seraphs cared to openly cross him or to dispute his will.

"What do you know of him, Parson?" demanded Gilchrist.

"That he is a professional detective, chief. I was down country last year, at Round-up City, when the racket was raised over the killing of Bailey Thorpe. This fellow came there and played a lone hand, chuck full of trumps, too, as it turned out. He broke the combination, and showed up in his real colors, as a detective."

"What was he called, at that time?"

"Grip-sack Sid, by some. The Sample Sport by others. He said his name was Sidney Harper."

Gilchrist turned toward his son, saying slowly:

"You say he told you that a better man was coming to take his place, Noll?"

"Just that," sulkily nodded the cub. "Dry-throat heard him!"

"I reckon he meant Mack Souders," nodded the portly Seraph.

"They seemed as thick as six in a bed," laughed Gypsy Joe Jack from out the gloom.

Warren Gilchrist bowed his head, seemingly buried in deep thought.

Silence reigned, for none of the Seraphs cared to interrupt their chief while he wore that ugly expression.

Presently Captain Arch-angel lifted his head, gazing slowly around before speaking. Not one of the Seraphs flinched, though more than one of them turned a shade paler, for it was not so hard to guess what was coming.

"Gentlemen, you have a more or less accurate idea of the game I am playing in this section. You know that there is big money lying just around the corner, waiting for us to pick it up. But I doubt if even the most sanguine among you has really grasped the full importance of this game."

"You think it is mainly for the secret bonanza which Pitt Laxton holds to himself, but there's where you are 'way off. I firmly believe in finding that bonanza we'll strike a modest fortune for each and everyone of us; but I know that in making the other rifle, we'll pull down double the amount!"

The Seraphs stirred, interchanging quick glances, but only venturing upon low mutterings. Not but that they were greedy enough,

but such a preface must mean hard and hot work in prospect.

"I'll tell you more, when you've shown yourselves worthy of confidence clear through," bluntly added the chief, his eyes glowing. "And as the first proof, which among you all will be the first to volunteer in a sort of forlorn hope?"

Again that rustling stir, but no openly uttered word for a single breath. Then Gypsy Joe Jack spoke out:

"What sort of forlorn hope, captain?"

"We can't rake in our game as long as Sidney Harper and Mack Souders are in the path. They've got to be disposed of. Who among you has the nerve and backbone to tackle them, or either one of them?"

Again there was silence. And once more Gypsy Joe broke it, with a soft, sneering laugh before saying:

"Must I do all the chinning, lads? Well, captain, for lack of a better man, I'll tackle this Grip-sack Sharp. I would have spoken before, but I didn't like to seem too forward, where all the rest are so mighty modest."

Dry-throat Johnny joined in that light laugh, then chipped in:

"I thought my name went down without talking. I started the job yesterday, and I never leave a piece of work unfinished."

Warren Gilchrist gave a chuckle of grim pleasure, for he knew both men, and knew that they could be depended on in a tight pinch.

"I'm glad that there are at least two men with nerve among the Seraphs and be sure you'll be no losers by the job. I'll give an even five hundred dollars for each detective, out of my own pocket, and if any row is kicked up over the killing, I'll stand to your back with men, money, and blood if necessary!"

"That begins to sound like business," came the cool, quiet tones of Parson Thede Able as that worthy came into the circle of light, his thin lips curling back to show his strong teeth. "Money talks, where empty wind is silent. Put up a neat little earnest, captain, and I'll agree to fix Sidney Harper for planting, before the stars begin their twinkling this blessed night that's coming!"

"Why Sidney Harper? What's the matter with Mark Souders?"

"Well, one job at a time," was the easy reply. "I know Harper, and so won't need to wait for an introduction. Still, put up a century, and I'll make it which one of the twain I happen to stumble over first."

Dry-throat Johnny and Gypsy Joe Jack interchanged quick glances. The former nodded slightly, and with a shrug of his broad shoulders, the swart Seraph held his peace.

Warren Gilchrist noted this interchange, and then promptly fell in with the terms proposed by the Parson. He quickly counted out the required sum, and thrusting it into his pocket, Able bowed, saying:

"I'll furnish the corpse, without fail, gentlemen, and invite you to the funeral in advance!"

Gilchrist passed the same amount over to McGee and Jack, at the same time grimly uttering:

"There's your earnest money, lads, but—just make a note of this in your minds: 'twill be a mighty dear drunk if you're thinking to play roots on me!"

Without waiting for his men to reply, Captain Arch-angel waved a hand in token of dismissal, and then sat in silence with his son until fully satisfied that they had really departed from that gloomy cavern.

"Luck go with them!" he muttered, half-dubiously, half-triumphantly as he sprang to his feet and caught up one of the candles from the table. "Money better spent never passed through my fingers if it bring about the death of those infernal bloodhounds!"

"Where to, dad?" quavered Oliver, shivering a bit as he saw his parent turn away as though to leave him alone. "Curse this hole! It gives me the cold shakes, just to think of it!"

"Take that light and follow, booby!" growled the elder, with an ugly scowl. "Grab my coat-tails, shut your eyes, and I'll keep the spooks off o' you—pore little innocent!"

Oliver contented himself with making a hideous grimace behind his father's back as that worthy led the way. Though a man in size and in years, the rascal was hardly more than a boy in some respects.

He followed his sire until a small niche, or chamber was reached, containing a large variety of wearing apparel, wigs, false beards, etc., among which Warren Gilchrist began fumbling hastily.

"What do you mean to do, dad?" ventured Oliver.

"What do I mean! To go back to Sodom and play the game out, though a thousand bloodhounds try to bar the way! Ay! I'll wake both them and the town itself up this very night!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PARSON TRIES HIS HAND.

ONLY an extraordinary activity saved Grip-sack Sid from receiving that first savage stroke

full in the left breast, for his assailant made use of weapon as well as tongue.

As it was, the keen blade slit through his coat and cut the strap by which the alligator-leather grip was suspended; but even as the assassin tried to repeat the blow, his armed hand was caught at the wrist with a force that jerked him partly off his balance, swinging him around into just the position for a "knock-out" blow.

It came, straight and sure as a shot, fairly lifting the fellow from his footing and sending him headlong a full dozen feet away.

Harper let go of that wrist as his enemy fell, to keep from cutting his own hand on that ugly blade, but the weapon flew from the temporarily-benumbed fingers, to stick upright in a soft bit of ground to one side.

The Grip-sack Sharp made no effort toward following up his advantage, partly because he knew what such a stroke ought to be worth, partly because he was in doubt whether or no he had not been seriously cut by that first vicious stroke.

Though the blow had been partly avoided, the hand of his assailant had struck him heavily on the breast, and he knew from past experience that a man cannot always tell how badly he is hurt, off-hand.

Opening the slit across his breast, he inserted his fingers, but despite the stinging pain, he found no break in the skin. Then he suddenly became conscious that there was fresh trouble brewing.

Those fierce sentences had been uttered loud enough to draw an audience, and enough had been caught for some among the gathering citizens to think the still upright man was the one in fault.

"It's a cursed shame!" cried one deep, peculiar-toned voice. "He ruined a once happy home, and now butchers the man who tries to avenge that deadly wrong! The rope for such cowardly hellhounds, say I!"

"Steady, my black-a-vised friend!" interposed a clear, metallic voice as a middle-sized figure strode rapidly into the ring, pistols in hand and ready for use. "Fair play's worth tons of foul, and the one who tries to double-bank my pard, must first down your Uncle Fuller!"

Grip-sack Sid at once recognized Mack Souders, and if he had been given his choice of backers, he could not have asked for a better one.

"Thanks, old fellow," he said, with a short, hard laugh as he ran his eyes over the gathering crowd, recognizing more than one among them whose name he had noted down for future use. "But I reckon I can hoe my own row to the end."

"Never a doubt o' that, as long as the row don't double around and try to sting you with its tail while you're doctoring its head," lightly laughed the detective.

Parson Thede Able was rising slowly to his feet, brushing a hand across his eyes, both of which were beginning to discolor from that heavy blow. His brain seemed dazed and dulled, but as he caught the voice of the man whom he had attempted to stab, that cloud seemed to pass away and leave him even more dangerous than before.

"Men of Sodom," he began, his voice clear, cold and deadly, far more impressive than when he had so madly shrieked out those damning charges against the Grip-sack Sharp. "You know me, and now it'll not be my fault if you don't know this wolf in sheep's clothing—the thief of honor, the murderer of babes, the foul destroyer of honest men's homes and happiness!"

"Is that all?" wonderingly echoed Harper.

The Parson turned upon him, showing his teeth in a grim smile. His voice was even, his tones coldly measured and merciless as fate.

"Jeer on, while you can. I've run you down at last, and now neither Heaven nor hell can rob me of my just vengeance."

"Who do you take me for, if I may ask the question?"

Grip-sack Sid spoke quietly, no longer smiling, for he recognized in this man an enemy to be dreaded rather than scoffed at.

He could not remember ever having met him before, and now that he had a square look at him, he seemed a notch above the ruffians who went to make up the gang of Seraphs.

It was just possible that the man had mistaken him for some other, and a few cool words might clear away the trouble without further harm being done.

"For yourself, Sidney Harper, as you now call yourself," icily retorted the Parson, still "playing for the pit" as he had begun. "For the dastardly wretch who stole into a quiet, peaceful, pure and happy if humble home—to leave it ruined, desolate, disgraced!"

"You've got my name, but not my nature, Mr.—What is your name?"

"What did the scoundrel do, Parson?" chipped in Gypsy Joe Jack, ready to further the ends of the Family by helping its representative along as well as he could while still in darkness as to his plans. "Out with it in plain words, and we'll serve as jury in the case."

"With Captain Arch-angel as judge, no doubt?" laughed Harper, beginning to see through the fog.

"You'd be happy that way, but you can't pack a court on white men such as grow in Sodom," retorted the swart rascal of the glib tongue.

"What do I charge him with, men of Sodom?" cried Parson Thede Able, lifting his sinewy hands on high, his strongly marked face showing terrible agitation, though his voice rung out clear and shrill, at each moment drawing other items to swell the crowd.

"I charge him with wearing a false-face of friendship toward me, while plotting to ruin my home and my life. I charge him with leading my poor young wife astray. I charge him with murdering my little babe, rather than be incumbered with it in his guilty flight. I charge him with all this, and with blasting my entire life. Is not that enough?"

"To send him up a tree in a holy hurry!" cried Gypsy Joe Jack, his swarthy face all aglow with honest indignation. "Men of Sodom—"

"Are too white not to wait for both sides of a story before jumping to a false conclusion," sharply interposed Grip-sack Sid. "I swear that every charge brought forward by this lunatic is false, from start to finish. I never met him before in my life, but I'm open to lay any reasonable sum that he belongs to the evil gang which has cursed your fine town entirely too long."

"You can blind them, perhaps," coldly broke in Parson Thede, that wolfish smile deepening on his face, "but empty denials won't save you from my vengeance. I've hunted you for years. I've found you now!"

"And tried to find my heart with your blade, a bit ago," laughed the Grip-sack Sharp, touching his severed garments to point his words. "You missed that, but you found my bunch of fives, instead."

"Don't shut off the air quite so much, gentlemen, if you please," coolly cried out Souders, his armed hands motioning back the crowd. "Keep your linen on, and let the two gents fight it out at will."

"And who may you be, that struts so mighty gay?" came a voice from the gathering.

"Just a bump on a log, but if you try to sit down on me too awfully solid, maybe you'll find that same bump harbors a hornet's nest."

Grip-sack Sid lifted a hand that caused his self-elected champion to subside with a bow, then spoke out clearly:

"This fellow has appealed to you, men of Sodom, and now I do the same. One of your number addressed him as Parson; may I ask if he is called Parson Thede Able?"

"And you bet he is just able, too!" mocked Gypsy Joe Jack, but not loud enough to entirely drown the chorus of assents to that question.

Harper laughed lightly as he turned his eyes upon his antagonist, but if he looked for confusion or dismay there, he was disappointed.

"It's not my name, but my bitter wrongs which you have to deal with, curse you—child-murderer!" he viciously snarled.

"And since he has appealed to you, men of Sodom," persisted Grip-sack Sid, while keeping a wary eye toward the rascal, "I'll let you into the full secret of his mighty wrongs. He belongs to the Seraphs. He was one of the gang that only this morning tried to roast an honest man and his daughter in their own house."

"Crawfish!" hooted Gypsy Joe Jack, lunging and ready to chip in, only for the ready revolvers held by Mack Souders.

"And because I happened to take part in defeating that rational amusement, the fellow thirsts for my gore! Well, you scoundrel!" turning openly upon the Parson, his gray eyes glittering with a dangerous light, as he added: "I'll give you your way for once. What do you ask for?"

"A fair chance to wipe out the foul disgrace you put upon my honored name," came the deliberate response.

"Still harping on that worn-out string?"

"Until you or I are dead!"

"Without a single question about Mary and the kid?"

That was a mistake, and Grip-sack Sid realized as much the moment those words passed his lips. An ugly muttering rose from the crowd, and Gypsy Joe Jack found plenty of backers to his loud cry of shame.

"I ask your pardon, gentlemen," said Harper, gravely, lifting his hat as he glanced around over that circle of faces. "I forgot that all of you couldn't know how utterly false these wild charges are. I swear, by High Heaven! that there was no ruined Mary, no murdered child, no wrecked home, so far as I am concerned. As for the rest—this fellow is a convicted thief, robber, house-burner, and if not an assassin as well, that's not his fault. Still, I'll give him the satisfaction he demands, trusting to the decent portion of Sodom to see that we each one of us has fair play."

"That's all I ask," coldly said the Parson.

"And how will you have it, Seraph?" smiled Harper, blandly. "You slipped up on the knife trick—are you any handler with the guns?"

"With two eyes like these?" harshly laughed the Parson, tapping his bruised brow and calling attention to his swelling orbs. "If you are not a cur, you'll agree to meet me with cold steel."

"You couldn't have hit me nearer where I live, Parson," with a tantalizing bow. "Now—the time and place?"

"Right now and right here!" flashed the thug, viciously. "I've spent years in searching for you. I've run you down at last, and I'll never lose sight of you until you're fitted for the crows!"

"Any objection raised to our sprinkling the street, men of Sodom?" called out the Grip-sack Sharp, as he moved to where his valise lay on the ground. "I'm a new-comer, and hardly know just what your rules and regulations are."

"Make a ring an' let 'em fight it out so!"

"Good as old wheat!"

"Never put off until to-morrow the fun you can corral to-day!"

Harper bowed a smiling assent to these enthusiastic cries, and opening his grip, took therefrom a blade which, as he removed the sheath, flashed in the sun like a quiver of flame.

It was one of those cruelly beautiful weapons known as a creese, the blade double-edged, waving regularly from haft to point.

"One of my line of samples, gentlemen," laughed Harper, twitching the weapon high above his head, watching it flash through the sunlight, and deftly catching it by the handle as it came swiftly down. "Warranted genuine, and only supplied by Our House. I'll just give you a specimen of its quality for pretty work, and then I'll be happy to book as many orders as you care to pelt me with. We buy for cash, and can undersell the cheapest house in opposition."

If this display was intended to shake the nerve of his antagonist, the Sample Sport failed most signally.

The Parson simply showed his teeth in a tigerish smile as he watched that flashing blade, at the same time removing his outer garments and baring his sinewy arms above the elbow.

"All the orders you send back home will go in a dead letter, Sidney Harper," he laughed, as he picked up the knife with which he had failed to cleave a heart. "Now—give your tongue a rest, and see what your hands can do!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PARSON CONVICTS HIMSELF.

"I'll be with you in a moment, Parson," coolly nodded Harper, holding the creese between his teeth while removing his outer garment, in imitation of the other.

"How is it to be?" asked Mack Souders, still watchful for the interests of his brother professional. "A fight to the finish, or merely after the French style?"

"To the death!" flashed Able, grimly vindictive.

"Then I've only one more word to add, but I want to clinch that same word too tight for claw-hammer to draw out again. I know this fellow to be an outlaw, and I know that he's got more than one mate within sound of my voice."

"I'd clap the nippers on him, out of hand, but for Mr. Harper offering to meet him with cold steel. As it is—I'll blow a hole clean through the first man who breaks into the ring, to lend aid to either one or the other of the two men!"

"And I'll watch that you don't mistake the Parson for an outsider, my flash cove!" grimly warned Gypsy Joe Jack, pistol in hand.

"I'll give you a bright and shining mark to shoot at, Gypsy," the detective laughed, pinning a gold badge directly over his heart. "Put a hole through that, send it with your name and residence to Denver, and I'll guarantee you all the courtesies of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association—for life!"

It was more than a love of display that incited Souders to make this move. He felt that Harper was being deliberately hunted down by the Seraphs, and he wanted the honest men of Sodom to see that they had fair play—no more.

He smiled grimly as he noted the effect wrought by his action, and then turned toward Harper, to assist him if he needed aught.

"Only keep an eye open for snakes, pardner," lightly nodded the Sample Sport, as he gripped his blade and slid forward until his right foot met that of the viciously grinning Parson.

The latter gave a swift lunge, hoping to catch his adversary off his guard, but Harper was hardly looking for the usual courtesies from a fellow of that caliber, and the knife encountered a guard of steel.

Slowly the sinewy arms rose higher, the blades locked, each man cautiously testing the strength of his adversary, trying to bear the opposing weapon back through sheer strength of muscle.

And Grip-sack Sid laughed softly, his gray eyes glittering as bright as his own unsullied blade, for the arm of the Parson was curving more and more, his own straightening out, inch by inch.

Then the parson leaped back a pace, disengaging his weapon, leaning far forward with a lightning-like thrust that was almost touching

the breast of his intended victim before Harper could parry it.

For the next twenty seconds—minutes they seemed, to the breathless spectators—change followed change so swiftly that the keenest eye was unable to note each one in turn. The Parson seemed bent on ending the struggle at a single heat, and the air between the duelists seemed literally filled with hands, each one gripping a fan of blades.

But Grip-sack Sid, though as yet standing on the defensive did not give an inch, a cold, pitiless smile playing about his lips, and lighting up his strong face. And those who took time to reason at all, told themselves that a man who could smile like that under such circumstances, was a man who knew he held the game in his own hands.

Parson Thede came to the same conclusion, and realized that he had found a master where he had counted on a novice; but he gave no signs of this in his hard face.

He pressed the attack even more desperately, but then, just when it seemed that Grip-sack Sid must give way before that savage pressure, Parson Thede leaped back a half-score feet, giving a vicious yell of deadly malice as he hurled his blade straight for the heart of his adversary!

"Die, you bloodhound!"

Only those few words of fierce anticipation, for with a marvelous pass Harper struck the weapon aside, high into the air, the steel ringing out in bell-like tones with the sharp collision.

Then, before the ruffian could fairly realize what had happened, the Grip-sack Sharp leaped forward, gripping him by the throat with one hand, bearing him to the ground as though a feeble child.

A hoarse, united yell went up from the interested and startled crowd at this unexpected ending, and there was a wild surging in their ranks.

"Steady, all!" trumpeted Mack Souders, his cocked revolvers rising and seeming to stare each and every individual squarely in the face. "The Parson demanded a fight to the finish, and I'm here to see that he gets his fill! Back! or I'll shoot to kill!"

"Let 'em fight it out boys!"

"Fair play, for the honor of old Sodom!"

Grip-sack Sid had borne his bewildered antagonist to the ground, spreading his own knees and dropping deftly astride of him, one hand burying its sinewy fingers in his throat, the other quivering the waved steel before his starting eyeballs.

He never gave the crowd a thought or a look, trusting all to his able backer and to the inborn honor of the citizens' nor was he mistaken in either.

Gypsy Jack, Dry-throat Johnny, with their mates, made an instinctive move as though to interfere, but when they heard those honest cries, and saw those excited faces, they thought better of it. They could not save the Parson, and they surely would sacrifice their own lives by interfering at that stage of the play.

"Your life or a full confession, Parson Thede Able!" sternly cried the Grip-sack Sharp as he lowered his weapon until its keen point pricked the wrinkled skin between those staring eyes. "I'll give you far more than you richly deserve: a fair chance to win back your miserable life."

The defeated thug gathered all his bodily powers into one desperate effort to cast his enemy off, and thus possibly turn the tables, though he knew that by so trying he again forfeited all claims to mercy at those hands.

But his struggles were promptly met and quickly subdued. That deadly grip tightened about his throat. Those knees clasped his ribs so fiercely that it seemed as though they must give way. That heavy body pressed down upon his abdomen with terrible force.

His tongue protruded, his eyes tried to wink, and Grip-sack Sid laughed grimly as he relaxed his efforts, to say:

"Squeal, is it, Parson? Better a live cur than a dead hound, eh?"

"Let up—I cave," hoarsely gasped the desperado.

"Then do it according to Gunter, my gentle fabricator. Did you speak the bald-headed truth when you accused me of eloping with Mary?"

"No. I was lying."

"And I butchered your kid, rather than buy milk for it, eh?"

"I never had a kid—curse you, let up!" with vicious shame at his complete downfall. "I admit that I was lying, all through. Isn't that enough, even for a bog?"

"Say it again, and say it loud enough for our mutual friends in the ring to drink in the whole savor of your eloquence, Parson," persisted his conqueror, enforcing his request with the point of his knife.

It was a terribly bitter pill, but it had to be swallowed, and the cowed ruffian obeyed.

"Good enough, as far as it goes," with a nod of grim approval. "Now I can look my fellow-citizens squarely in the face again. And having satisfied them, I'll take a bite for my own delectation."

"You never took up this job on your own account, Parson. Some one with a longer purse hired you to play cat to his monkey. Who was it?"

"I never—I thought you were the man who helped hang a dear friend, two years ago," huskily muttered the Parson.

"Who was it, I asked you, Parson?" pitilessly insisted the Grip-sack Sharp. "Don't force me to show all Sodom the color of your blood, dear lad; you'd die of shame for them to see how white it is—after your liver and your feather, Parson!"

"If I tell, will you let up?"

"Who was it that hired you to put me out of the way?"

"Pitt Laxton, curse you!" snarled the thug, viciously.

"I asked for the truth, not a lie. Who was it that hired you?"

"Strike, curse you!" snarled the ruffian, in desperation.

"Souders, will you please hand me my grip?" coldly asked Harper, turning his head for an instant, then slipping the creese between his teeth as he drew a pair of plated handcuffs from the receptacle, deftly snapping them on the wrists of the Parson, then springing to his feet.

"What's all this?" gasped Able, starting dizzily to his feet.

"It means that I arrest you as one of the Seraphs," sharply cried Souders, gripping his shoulder, "for robbery and attempted murder!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

THE Parson seemed fairly crushed by this swift action, but only for a moment. Then, with a flashing glance around, he cried out:

"Do you call this a square deal, friends? Will you let this fresh knave pull me after this fashion?"

"Their kicking might annoy me a bit, but it couldn't save you, Parson," grimly warned the detective, his keen eyes roving over the crowd, ready to meet and checkmate any dangerous move on the part of the Seraphs.

Able actually gnashed his strong teeth in his fierce rage and despair. If he had but the use of his hands for a single instant!

"You—to you I owe all this!" he hoarsely cried, turning toward Grip-sack Sid, who was deftly joining the severed ends of his grip strap by means of pen-knife and a bit of fishline.

"Don't croak, Parson," was the careless reply. "I offered you the life you had justly forfeited according to your own stipulations, but you preferred filling the atmosphere with lies. I didn't care to kill you in cold blood, and so ironed your hands to keep them from scratching while I could get out of sight."

"You lie!" snarled the captured Seraph, his lips tinged with foam. "It's all a foul conspiracy between you two accursed bloodhounds! You are playing in cahoots, and—"

"Wait a wee, Parson," sharply interposed Grip-sack Sid, closing up his pen-knife and putting it in his pocket, then swinging his repaired grip into its accustomed place. "If you insist on going back to our old bargain, I can accommodate you; but if you do crowd it, I'll make you live up to the very letter of the bond. I'll slit your throat just as surely and pitilessly as you would have slit mine had you come out on top instead of being the under dog."

"You promised me—"

"And you declined to accept that promise."

"I told you everything that—"

"Except just what I wanted to know most; who hired you to put me out of the way?"

"Pitt Laxton, as I told you before."

Sidney Harper turned coldly toward the detective whose left hand had through all this rested upon the Parson's shoulder, his right gripping a cocked revolver.

"Mr. Souders, have you any particular wish to hold this knave?"

"Such a decided wish, sir, that if you try to break my hold, you've got to break my pate first," with a grim nod.

"Then I transfer my claim to you, and as you backed me up a bit ago, I'll return the compliment now. Eyes front, and I'll play stern-wheel for the nonce!"

"The circus is over, gentlemen, and the side-show don't perform this evening," coolly called out Mack Souders, pushing his prisoner forward, nodding to the crowd to open a passageway.

Quite as much in admiration for his pluck as for the official badge he wore upon his breast, the interested citizens obeyed, permitting him to pass through what had recently been a human ring. Some of them cheered the detective, and others scowled blackly, eager and longing to rescue the captive, but none of them daring to make the first move while the Grip-sack Sharp acted as rear guard, pistols in hand.

Death would almost certainly reward the leader, and without an opportunity to consult and number those who might be depended upon to promptly back up such a rush, even the most desperate among the thugs dared not take that step across the death-line.

With little difficulty the two bold hearts conducted Parson Thede Able to the stout stone building in which Policy Pete Huck had al-

ready been installed for safe-keeping. And while Mack Souders vanished inside with his captive, Grip-sack Sid turned at the threshold to give the following crowd a bit of a talk.

"I thank you, gentlemen, for your close and flattering attention, both on account of my friend and myself. If I wasn't so awfully bashful, I'd enjoy the compliment heap sight more; but I was born that way."

"Sweet Sixteen ain't a patchin' to you, ye pore, onfort'nit critter!" came a mock sympathetic voice from the gathering.

"Lend me a fan, somebody, or I'll never be able to struggle through my little piece. But as I set out to say: I was forced to pit my life against that of a thoroughbred thug, whom I had just defeated in an attempt to stab me. If he had won, I'd be ready for the boneyard this moment. Fortune favored me, and I downed him."

"By his own conditions his life was forfeited. Not a man within sound of my voice could have called it other than square had I slit his throat, or perforated his heart right then and there."

"Instead of killing him, thus surely ending his earthly career, I preferred to give him a respite, even though under the shadow of the law. He madly accused me of playing in cahoots with Mack Souders, but on my honor as a gentleman and a drummer, I pledge you my word that Souders and I are each one playing on his own hook, and that there is no business connection between us whatever."

"Then you're not a detective?"

"Not so long as Our House pays me both commission and a salary so big that I have to look twice before I can count the row of figures each month's work represents," laughed the Grip-sack Sharp. "But I'll not bore you with personal palaver just at present, though I must say you never in all your lives met a bigger-hearted fellow, or one who can show you a finer lot of samples, ranging from a paper of pins up to a city of the first-class!"

"The point I wanted to make is like this: Parson Thede Able has been arrested for crimes which, if fully proved, may cost him his life. But I'll pledge you my word that no effort shall be made to spirit him away from town, or to bring him to trial without first giving you all public warning; his friends to see that he has fair play, his enemies to decide what, if any charges they wish to bring against him."

"That is all, for the present, gentlemen. I'll see you later, and bring with me the choicest line of samples you ever dreamt of!"

With a profound bow, Grip-sack Sid stepped backward through the opening door, vanishing from view before even a cheer could arise.

Nor would he show his face again, though repeatedly called for by the more enthusiastic, and though a few of the citizens lingered longer about the place, the crowd began to melt away, the more thirsty among them seeking moisture for their throats so that they could still talk freely of that remarkable duel.

The Grip-sack Sharp was caught sight of a number of times through the remainder of that day, but his movements were so quick that there was scant chance of a crowd gathering, either of friends or of enemies.

But as the evening began to wane, the Grip-sack Sharp dropped into a prominent saloon and gambling place, entitled "The Tontine."

He showed no signs of the rough, tough work he had gone through with during the past thirty hours, looking as fresh and smiling as though just leaving "Our House" for a trip that promised him both rich reward and high honor.

His water-stained and knife-cut garments had been changed for a new suit, neat and admirably fitting, just gay enough to fit his character of traveling agent. His derby hat was glossy. His grip-sack was a new one, glittering with plated ornaments.

His first action on entering the bar, as a matter of course as well as of business, was to genially invite all present to join him in a friendly glass. Equally as a matter of course there were no declinations, for prohibitionists are few and far between in a mining-camp like Sodom City, and those few are seldom to be met with before a public bar.

And then, too, the word hastily passed around that this was the "fresh" who had so completely downed Parson Thede Able. It was an honor to clink glasses with such a celebrity.

As he leaned gracefully against the bar, wiping his lips with a flirt of his kerchief, a look of sympathy crept into his face as his roving gaze paused upon the discolored eye of a rather tough-looking citizen who had just emptied a glass.

"My dear sir," starting forward and warmly gripping a dingy paw as he inspected that discolored optic more closely. "I don't want to be personal, but—that's a pretty bad eye of yours!"

"Splitting kindlin'-wood fer my woman, an' a stick flew up an' tuck me slap in the peeper," grinned the rough, ringing in the ancient chestnut, as a matter of course.

"Pity! if I'd only been there, or if you'd only owned a box of my wonderful salve!" purred Harper, unclasping his grip and taking out a

round tin box, slipping off the cover and with the tip of a finger deftly anointing the bruised flesh. "Greatest thing in the world for married men who have to split wood. Can knock an eye out or punch it in with a broomstick: rub a bit of this Magic Salve on the place and I'll guarantee a new eye before day dawns again."

Drawing back a pace to view his handiwork, he added:

"Of course you can't expect quite so speedy a cure in your case, pardner, since the blood has thickened, but you'll have to use a microscope in the morning to see where that bruise has gone to. Applied at the time, it would not only have prevented any bruise appearing, but would have made you feel so deliciously happy that you'd be splitting kindling until this very minute!"

"Wonderful thing!" almost in tones of awe as he watched the box spinning on the polished bar. "Wonderful fellow that invented it, too! Frank Dewey, an adopted son of Bleeding Kansas. Dewey's Magic Salve, the label informs you, but if a dictionary could be boiled down and pasted on that cover, it couldn't begin to enumerate the virtues of that glorious compound. And only five-and-twenty cents a box! Only one quarter of a dollar for Paradise condensed! Simply two-bits for an entire hospital, drugstore, pharmacy, apothecary shop all boiled down and crowded into this weenty bit o' box!"

"Why, gentlemen, I pledge my word as a drummer—and they never deal with aught save the straight truth—that if you ever get dead-broke, all you need is to grease your hand with this marvelous compound, and ducats will come rolling in heap faster than you can push 'em into your pockets!"

"Rub a speck on your Sunday mustache before calling on your best girl, and you want to take along a cheap man to breathe for you; Mary Jane'll never give you a chance to catch breath for yourself!"

"And with a box of this in his coat-tail pocket, you can mildly smile at the old gentleman as he sends you a sample of leather; for unless he has a box of his own, he'll simply bruise his pet corns and take the rest out in howling for a rest!"

"But s'pose'n he hes got a box?" grinned the black-eyed man.

"Then he'll be so mighty good-natured that he'll fetch you the morning paper and beg you to nominate your choice for breakfast," was the bland response, as the drummer opened his grip and took out a number of the boxes. "So—though I don't mean to crowd business into leisure hours—here's your chance to grow wealthy on a single two-bit piece. Who's the first happy man?"

Although Grip-sack Sid seemed entirely absorbed in chanting his praises of the Magic Salve, his keen eyes promptly noted the entrance of Gypsy Joe Jack, the swart fellow who had used his malicious tongue so freely during the little episode with Parson Thede Able.

From what passed then, Harper naturally looked for trouble from this muscular fellow, and though he gave no signs, he prepared for it as best he knew how.

He was still engaged in praising up his wares, when another man entered the saloon, pistol in hand, crying out harshly:

"Now I have got you, Gypsy Joe! Defend yourself, or—"

"Down you go, Dry-throat!" cried Jack, leaping swiftly to one side as their weapons exploded, thus bringing Harper directly between two fires.

And with a sharp cry, the drummer dropped to the sanded floor!

CHAPTER XXX.

A FOUR-HANDED GAME OF DRAW.

THE bar ran lengthwise with the house, the door opening in the front of the building. Thus one entering, and making a spring to the left, would cover any one standing near the counter.

This Dry-throat Johnny did, while Gypsy Joe was standing just past the further end of the bar, near the entrance to the gambling room proper.

The Grip-sack Sharp stood midway, fairly caught between two fires, and the bold game was played so smartly that his death might easily have been passed off as an accident, unfortunate indeed, but natural enough under the circumstances.

And death would surely have caught him, then and there, had he not been wholly on his guard at the moment of action. As it was, he lost a new hat, split across the crown by those crossing bullets as he dropped to the floor.

Unharmed, he rolled swiftly over, leaping to his feet with each hand armed, crying sternly:

"Hands up, you curs! I've got you lined—for death!"

Taken completely by surprise, so certain had they felt that their cunning trick had worked to perfection, the two ruffians stared aghast, their pistol-hands lowered. And then, like an echo to that sharp command, came the voice of Mack Souders as he stepped over the threshold:

"I'll take Dry-throat off your hands, pard. You pinch Gypsy Joe!"

There was a wild scattering of the crowd, but neither detective gave their game the ghost of a chance to either flee or to shoot. They had them lined, and a touch of the finger meant certain death.

"Hold on, you!" gasped Joe Jack, unnerved for the moment by this complete turning of the tables. "It's all a mistake!"

"On your part, but hardly on ours," grimly laughed the Grip-sack Sharp. "Drop your gun at your feet and then throw up your dukes. Be careful, you thug! I'll drill your skull if you crook a finger!"

"Ditto here and to you, Johnny McGee!" chimed in Souders. "I'm just honing for blood, and I'll break my blessed neck in jumping for even the ghost of a chance to paralyze you from now to eternity!"

"Curse you!" snarled Gypsy Joe, showing his teeth. "Give a man a chance, can't ye?"

"You took your chance without asking permission, and botched it, badly. Drop that gun and lift your empty hands. Last warning!"

In sullen rage the swart ruffian obeyed. And under the gentle persuasion of Mack Souders, Dry-throat Johnny followed suit.

"All up on my end, pardner," he cried, cheerily. "Shall I put the bracelets on them, just to make it more binding?"

"You've got to kill me, first!" flashed Jack.

"We could do that, and deserve a medal from the community for so doing," coldly said the Grip-sack Sharp, bolding his man covered, paying no attention to the other ruffian, knowing that Mack Souders would hold him level. "We may do it, but first—listen, men of Sodom."

"These two rascals are leading members in the vile gang that has brought shame and disgrace on your town. They are Seraphs, and like their mate, Parson Thede Able, they have been egged on to kill me off, simply because I've happened to cross the path of their chief, Captain Arch-angel."

"It's a foul lie!" growled Gypsy Joe, scowling fiercely, as he caught that ugly murmuring from among the listeners. "He's only trumping up an excuse to down us, without a show for our lives."

"And that same Captain Arch-angel is none other than the man you know and have associated with as Warren Gilchrist!"

The murmur broke into open threats and cries of startled wonder.

Dry-throat Johnny tried to stem the tide with a harsh laugh that was meant to express supreme contempt and incredulity, but the effort could hardly be termed a complete success.

"It's a foul and clumsy lie!" cried Gypsy Joe, though as yet not daring to lower his hands, much less attempt to snatch a weapon. "It's all a put-up job to win a little cheap notoriety. You cur!" his black eyes fairly turning red, as they glared at the Grip-sack Sharp. "You dare not give a man a chance to get even!"

"You are no man, Joseph Jack. You're simply a tool in the hands of a still viler scoundrel."

"I'm so much of a man that you dare not meet me on the level," with a short, harsh laugh that told his nerves were being gotten under control, after being shaken by that wholly unexpected defeat of his well-laid scheme.

"Your ideas of square dealing are rather shady, Gypsy, but I'll listen to what you have to propose, if only to see how far your sublime impudence will carry you."

"All I ask is fair play. I'm a better man than you dare be, in each and every way, if you only start square."

"Which means to stand up with my eyes shut and hands folded while you two gentlemen deliberately pot me with your cross-fire?" coldly sneered the Grip-sack Sharp.

"That was a mistake, and—"

"On your part, granted. A mistake to think even for a moment that such snarling curs as yourself and Dry-throat Johnny, each one of whom tried to roast me alive no later than yesterday, while McGee helped pitch me into Satan's Soup-bowl—"

"Drop your foul lies, and shoot if you are too cowardly to meet us on an even footing!"

"Well, it would be cheating the hangman, I reckon," drawled Harper, with a dangerous smile creeping into his strong face. "But for all that I'm strongly tempted to give you the very ticket you seem to crave. How shall it be, Mack?"

"I'm following my leader," briskly responded the detective. "It means hanging if I put the nippers on them, and only killing if they insist on a regular duel."

"I claim first whack at you, Sid Harper," growled Gypsy Joe.

"Hold on, you!" cried Mack Souders, a broad smile lighting up his face and glowing from his eyes. "Why not crowd the mourners while we're about it? Make it a four-handed game, and I'll waltz to gentle Johnny, here. He's so big I couldn't miss him were I to try!"

The two ruffians interchanged glances, plainly troubled by this unexpected proposition, and keen-eyed Harper instantly divined that they

had hopes of springing a foul trap on him and Souders if they could force two separate duels upon him.

That decided his course of action, and a swift look telegraphed as much to the little detective, who bluntly added:

"It's two against two, and one signal for the bunch, gentlemen, or the show ends before it begins. I'll snap the bracelets on you both and add you to my growing menagerie as members of the Seraphs. Take your choice, and don't be all night about making it known, either!"

The murmur which had been eddying through the eager spectators now burst into an enthusiastic cheer at this speech. A street fight was no great rarity in Sodom, but a quadruple duel, according to rule, was something out of the general run.

"Any way, just so we have a half-way fair shake," coldly acquiesced Gypsy Joe Jack, making the best of a bad bargain.

Dry-throat Johnny said nothing, one way or the other. His florid face was unusually pale, and his thick lips caught fits of quivering. He looked like a man defeated at the outset, though he tried to carry it off as jauntily as his bolder comrade in crime.

"The moon is full, and gives ample light for pistol-practice," easily said Grip-sack Sid, lowering his weapon, but still holding it in readiness for instant use in case Gypsy Joe should attempt to steal an advantage. "Daylight would be better, but if we can't hit the bigness of a man by moonshine, then we'll need the dim light to soften our blushes of shame."

"Chin-chin no good!" scowled Jack, darkly. "Who's to boss things?"

"We'll do it in company, dear fellow," purred the Sample Sport, never more dangerous than when he smiled after that fashion. "You and your mate will march out in advance."

"So you can shoot us from behind?" sneered Gypsy Joe, viciously.

"And walk thirty paces up the street," placidly continued the Grip-sack Sharp. "At that distance you will stop and wheel, waiting for the word, which Mr. Morgan will give, from midway. Then you are at liberty to fire at whichever of us you think you'd rather hit, at will."

"You've got the bulge, and we've got to fall in to your song, but if you play us foul, I'm leaving your pay to the honest men of Sodom."

With these words, Gypsy Joe Jack easily locked arms with Dry-throat Johnny, leaving the saloon, and pacing off the named distance up-street.

This was quickly done, and then, standing a few feet from each other, the two Seraphs faced their antagonists, waiting for the word.

Morgan was on the point of giving it, when out upon the still night air there rung the wild alarm of fire.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PLAYING A BOLD GAME.

SHORTLY after the Grip-sack Sharp left him with that hardly consoling promise of a later call, Pitt Laxton was told that his daughter was rising, and would be with him as soon as he could gain the chamber assigned him for his own use.

Although his severe wound would cover much, the miner struggled hard to blot out the ugly lines carved in his pale face by those hard, pitiless words of the detective, and succeeded so well that Inza shed tears of joy at his improved looks.

Neither of them touched openly on the matter of Fred Benight, though his part in the exciting tragedy could not be entirely ignored, and Inza must hear every little detail of the events occurring after his reluctant retreat from the lone cabin.

Then Thomas Massey, their old friend, together with "Mother Massey," had to hear the entire story. And so, when Dr. Grable called, just before his supper, he distinctly laid down the law that all further talking must be postponed for at least another day.

"You've got to go to bed and get a whole night's sleep, sir, or I'll know the reason why. I'll call assistance and drench you with a quart bottle of laudanum, sir, if milder means fail. And you, Miss Inza of the feverish tongue—to bed, to bed!"

Before he trotted down-stairs to answer the brazen call of the supper-bell, Dr. Grable received a promise from both that his orders should be strictly followed.

Pitt Laxton was glad enough to do so, with such a fair excuse for postponing the threatened call from Sidney Harper, and now that she was satisfied her father had not been dangerously wounded, Inza also found that she could stand another sound sleep.

Still, despite his fatigue, loss of rest, and bodily weakness consequent on his loss of blood, it was a late hour before Pitt Laxton fairly succumbed to slumber. Then he was suddenly awakened by a clammy hand resting across his mouth, shutting off his breath.

"Chirp louder than a whisper, and off comes your head!" harshly muttered the forbidding face that bent over him as he lay on his back.

By the dimly-burning night-lamp Pitt Laxton

could note the ugly knife that quivered above his face, threatening to fall and split his defenseless throat wide open.

He had been dreaming of Sidney Harper, and naturally enough his first thought on being so rudely awakened was that the avenger of Arthur Benight had come to arrest him for that long-ago crime; but dim and uncertain though the light was, he quickly realized his mistake.

"I've got ye foul, my covey," distinctly muttered his assailant, lowering that menacing blade until its keen point pricked through the sensitive skin. "The house is snoozing, but even if every soul was wide awake, and at your very door, weighed down with guns an' sich-like, they couldn't keep me from workin' my sweet will onto you."

Dim though the light was, Pitt Laxton began to recognize the ruffian who held his life at the point of his blade. For a time that shaggy disguise baffled him, but then a light of despairing horror leaped into his staring eyes, to be greeted with a low, malicious laugh from the captor.

"Caught the likeness, have you, old friend? Then—when I warn you that your life hangs on your tongue, you ought to know just how much dependence you can place upon that threat."

Warren Gilchrist drew away his hand, leaving the lips of his victim free to sound the alarm in case he dared run the risk; but Pitt Laxton lay on his bed shivering like a leaf, his face ghastly indeed.

"You demon! have you no fear, no pity?"

"Coo softly as a sucking-dove, old friend, if you love the gentle Inza," grimly warned the chief of the Seraphs, turning so as to sit on the edge of the bed, his armed hand resting lightly over the heart of his victim. "As for fear: what should I fear? And when you come to prate of pity—how much did you show Arthur Benight, back in Baltimore?"

A cry of angry despair rose in the throat of the miserable man, but it got no further. Careless though he seemed, Warren Gilchrist was watching every change in that hunted face, and his sinewy right hand gripped Laxton by the throat, his broad left palm covering his mouth.

"Will you?" his strong teeth grating savagely together, as his little eyes glowed redly into those of his victim. "Give a yelp of counterfeited fear to bring an army upon my back? Swallow it down—swallow it deep, or I'll close your earthly accounts right here!"

Despite his vicious savagery, there was a suspicion of mockery about the manner of the Seraph. He borrowed a touch of the cat to mingle with the bull-dog, and the combination was a hideous one.

Choking his enemy until his face turned purple, and his tongue came through his parted lips, Gilchrist slackened his death-grip, laughing brutally as he resumed his former position.

"You may have been a smart infant, Pitt Laxton, but ever since I crossed your path, you've played the idiot to perfection. Perhaps after I've administered a few more doses of discipline, you'll begin to improve."

"I didn't—mean to—cry—"

"Nor would you have cried had help come in answer to your little song," mocked the Seraph. "Because my knife would have done its work too quick. Now—let's have a wee bit of a confab, Carl Bassett."

Despite his desperate attempt to school his nerves, the wounded miner could not entirely avoid betraying his horror at this fresh proof of how completely the black past was reviving.

"Don't try it on again, my dear fellow," quickly warned Captain Archangel. "I reckon we can put you to better use than supplying the main attraction of a funeral procession, but you mustn't try to kick over the traces every time you hear me crack a whip."

"I've not been sleeping ever since you and I parted at your palace, and I'm fully aware of the bobbery those two professional bloodhounds have been kicking up in regard to the Seraphs. I know that either or both of them would give a good hand to shutter the other on my wind-pipe. But, all the same, I wanted to talk with you so badly that I discounted all risk, and here I am."

"They robbed me—your ruffians—and I'm without a dollar for your hungry fingers," huskily muttered Laxton.

"They did?" with a start and savage click of his teeth. "Of how much? And who were they?"

"Of all I had laid up for my poor girl. I only saw Fire-top Finney, though there was at least one more."

Warren Gilchrist was silent for a brief space, but then he seemed to brush that subject aside for the present, though doubtless he made a mental note which his Seraphs would have to answer in full, when a more opportune moment arrived.

"Time is passing, and I've got a goodly distance to ride this same night, pardner, so you'll pardon me if I get down to plain business without further beating about the bush. You still refuse to tell where your secret mine is hidden?"

"There is none. I'll swear by any oath you—"

"And swear to a lie while doing so! All right: you refuse to speak, but maybe I can coax the gentle Inza to be more communicative while the bridal blush is still fresh upon her cheeks."

"Mercy—do what you will with me, but spare my little girl!"

"Bless you, Carl, I'll treat her whiter than a queen, at least so long as she holds such a precious secret back of her ruby lips," the outlaw laughed, sneeringly. "After—well, that rests with her and Noll. I reckon he'll treat her as well as the average husband."

"If I had such a secret to divulge, would you swear never to harm or influence her—"

He cut himself short, with a subdued groan, as he caught that eager glow fastened upon him. He had never so nearly betrayed his golden secret, but Warren Gilchrist was not to gain his ends that night, at least.

"Go on—I'll promise all you can ask, Pitt Laxton!"

"I can't—I've no such secret—worse luck!" sullenly muttered the wounded miner.

Smothering a fierce curse of bitter disappointment, Captain Archangel bent over his victim, hands on face and throat, seemingly about to wipe out his chagrin in murder.

A low, yet clear sound escaped his bearded lips, and as he hung over the miner, the chamber door silently opened, to admit two dark figures.

The door closed without a sound, and silent as ghosts the two men crept across the floor and crouched down behind the head-board of the bed on which Pitt Laxton lay.

Seemingly ignorant of all this, Warren Gilchrist once more released his prey, standing erect before him while speaking coldly:

"You have had your last chance, old fellow. You threw it over your shoulder. I'll never ask you again to reveal the mine from whence you pulled all those golden plums. If I have to press that point, 'twill be with a gentler, less stubborn creature. Now—"

He lifted his right hand, and as though this was the signal for which they had been lying in wait, the two masked figures quickly left their place of hiding, pouncing upon the wounded man, one holding him helpless, while the other deftly gagged and bound him hand and foot.

"Make a sure thing of it, Seraphs," coldly uttered Captain Archangel, watching their movements with eyes aglow. "Fix him so he can't tumble out of bed and hurt his delicate frame!"

A stout rope was passed around both man and bed, then firmly knotted, rendering such an event impossible. Then a gesture sent the outlaws back a pace or two, while their chief bent closer to his helpless and miserable victim.

"This isn't just how I calculated to work the oracle, Bassett, but needs must when the devil drives, and especially when two devils are on the box-seat. All the same, I mean to get there with both feet!"

"I'm playing for a bigger stake than your secret bonanza, rich as I've reason to think that is. Whether you know it or not, there is a fortune awaiting the heirs or heir of Carl Bassett. I know of but one heir, and that is your little Inza."

"Does that sting you, poor fellow?" with a mocking laugh, as his victim shivered afresh. "You fear that the little woman will learn just how her loved father distinguished himself by extinguishing a bosom friend? Well, you can't blame me for that. And you'll hardly be wide awake enough to note the blush of shame that may mantle her damask cheek—hardly!"

"You see, Carl, 'twill take time to bring all things around as a fellow would like to have them. First, Inza must be spirited away to a point where we can win her coy affections, and gain her perfect confidence; without that, she'd hardly tell us where your secret bonanza lies waiting; and I've already promised that strike to my gallant Seraphs in payment for their friendly aid."

"Then, after all this will come the marriage and the wedding-trip to— Well, I reckon you know where the honest Winter Bassett used to live, without my telling you. And then—you'll be little better than a dim and dusty phantom of the past, and Inza will quickly dry her tears of shame while tending to the little kids!"

Captain Archangel waved his hand, and his two men glided silently out of the chamber, leaving the arch-villain alone with his victim.

Gilchrist produced a small sponge, and pouring upon it a vial of chloroform, deftly tied it over the lips and nose of his victim, drawing back with a malicious laugh as he spoke again:

"Cruel? You wrong me, Carl Bassett! I never did a more merciful act in my life. For already the hotel is afire, and only for this act, you would suffer a foretaste of what awaits you after death!"

Then, chuckling viciously, he passed from the chamber, leaving Pitt Laxton to his hideous doom!

CHAPTER XXXII.

FLUSHED WITH HIS SUCCESS.

CAPTAIN ARCH-ANGEL closed the door behind him, and silently passed along to another chamber, over the entrance to which his men were keeping guard.

In answer to his whispered query, they softly answered that no suspicious sound had come to their ears, and then his hand touched the knob, gently turning it and pushing the door open wide enough for entrance.

Here, as had been the case with Pitt Laxton, a night-lamp was burning, and the inmate of the low bed was sleeping peacefully as a babe.

A sign told one Seraph to guard the door, and sent the other to the closed window which looked out upon the side street.

Gilchrist himself crept up to the bed, a gag held in one hand, the other with broad palm ready to fall ever those slightly parted lips in case his first efforts to insert the gag should be frustrated.

For an instant he stood gazing gloatingly upon that vision of unconscious loveliness, then fell to work.

The gag was pushed fairly into the maiden's mouth, a hand closed upon her white throat, his body pressed her firmly to the bed, rendering all outcry or movement impossible.

"Quiet, Miss Laxton!" he gratingly uttered, his eyes glowing savagely into hers as they sprung open in terror. "Make a sound, and 'twill be the death-note of your precious father, Pitt Laxton!"

Hampered as the poor girl was, this grim warning seemed wholly superfluous, but knowing how intensely she loved her parent, Warren Gilchrist preferred to make assurance doubly sure.

Working swiftly, he knotted the strings attached to the gag behind the poor child's head, then caught both her hands in his, pinning her wrists together as he added:

"For *his* sake, even as for your own, Miss Laxton, I trust you will act sensibly. No actual harm is intended you. I'd burn my good right hand off to the wrist before I'd maliciously treat you so rudely; but, under the circumstances, I can't help it."

Holding both hands in one of his own, Captain Archangel used his right to twist a strong thong about her wrists, then aiding the knotting with his strong teeth.

This done, he drew back a bit, to look after his Seraphs. One was still on guard at the door, and he silently shook his head in response to that look of inquiry.

No sound indicating an alarm had reached his keen ears, and so far their atrocious plot had proven a complete success.

The second ruffian had opened the window, propping it up by means of a stout jack-knife, and was now busied with a rude but convenient means of descent, unwinding a stout, knotted rope from about his waist.

Leaving his victim for a moment, Captain Archangel crossed over to the guard, whispering as he motioned toward the garments lying on a chair, put where Inza had discarded them while preparing for bed.

"Pick up all that rigging, and make a bundle of it. Don't forget the shoes, nor that head-covering, yonder. Work lively, and when all's put, slip down the rope and hold it steady for our coming. *Sabe?*"

"Bet I do, boss," nodded the ruffian, falling to work with more vigor than sense of order, bundling up the garments and tying them together with a string produced from his pocket.

Meanwhile Warren Gilchrist had returned to the bedside, exultation glowing in his evil eyes and poorly hidden in his subdued voice as he addressed the helpless girl.

"You can't even begin to guess how awfully sorry I am to be compelled to treat you thus rudely, Miss Laxton, but when you come to know all the puzzling points, I'm confident you will almost, if not entirely forgive me."

The maiden tried to speak, but only a stifled, inarticulate sound rose in her throat. That cruel gag effectually hampered her vocal organs. But Captain Archangel guessed as if he did not rightly interpret the question she would have asked.

"Your father is in good hands, my dear, and anxiously waiting for you to join him. As to why all this mystery is necessary, time is too precious for me to give a full explanation just now, but I'll say this much: detectives are bounding your father to his grave, and without my help, he is lost beyond all hope."

While uttering this audacious lie, Gilchrist watched his men as they rapidly neared the completion of their work. One had the clothes all picked up, and the other was just tying the last knot which was to hold the rope-ladder secure while they descended through the window.

"Your father is already outside the hotel, Miss Laxton," added Captain Archangel, a motion of his hand bidding the outlaw in charge of the clothes to leave by way of the window. "Every moment that passes without your joining him is a lifetime of agony. I hate to ask it, but you must see that it's the quickest, wisest way."

As he spoke, he wrapped two ends of a cover-

let about the maiden, then lifted her from the bed and stood her upon her feet. Taking one of the sheets, he twisted it into a rope, passing it about the coverlet, knotting it firmly in place.

Then he lifted Inza in his arms, bearing her to the window, at the same time motioning the outlaw to completely turn down the light.

This done, Gilchrist looped the end of the rope just below the arms of the trembling girl, whispering her to be brave and fear not; that it was all for the safety of her loved father.

With his Seraph gripping the slack of the rope, Captain Arch-angel gently thrust his captive through the window, steadying her as far out as his arms would reach, then grasping the rope and quickly lowering her into the arms of his tool below.

When the strain slackened, he quickly descended himself, taking Inza in his strong arms and swiftly gliding away from the spot, passing to the rear of the hotel, then cutting across a waste stretch until the little town was fairly left behind them.

Not until then did he pause for breath, laughing lowly as his two satellites came up with inquiring glances.

"Get the horses ready, lads, for if I'm not mistaken most awfully, there's going to be a regular swarming of hornets over yonder! Work lively, now, and tell Mr. Laxton that his daughter will be with him in a holy second!"

He took the bundle of clothes from the ruffian, breaking the string that confined them, and scattering the garments over the stiff bushes by which they were surrounded, saying:

"It's a tiring chamber hardly equal to your merits, Miss Laxton, but when the devil drives, you know! And the quicker you dress, the sooner you'll be with your father."

He untied the knotted sheet, then slipped a knife underneath to sever the cords that held her hands and arms helpless, talking the while with glib tongue:

"I'll keep ward and watch while you jump into your garments, Miss Laxton. This is too critical a time for yielding to mock modesty. Just remember that I'm an old married man, with children older than you are, and don't go to fancying that I've got prying eyes in the back of my head, please!"

Still leaving the gag in her mouth, Captain Arch-angel turned his back upon the trembling, bewildered maiden, his little eyes glowing with savage triumph as he caught a rapidly-increasing glow in the direction of Sodom City.

"Good boy, Noll!" he chuckled, barely above his breath, rubbing his paws together in unholy glee. "Let the Seraphs sneer at their sub-chief after this good night's work, if they can!"

Inza, trembling in every fiber, dreading she scarcely knew what, hastened to don her clothes, and though her fingers shook so that they seemed well-nigh helpless, she never clothed herself in less time than in the present emergency.

She was putting on her shoes when Warren Gilchrist turned to note what progress she was making, and at the same time a distant yell came to their ears from the town—a yell that speedily grew into a wild uproar, such as can be drawn forth only by a spreading conflagration in a flimsily built town, where adequate means of fighting the flames are altogether lacking.

Without stopping to button her shoes, Inza sprang to her feet, her face ghastly pale, her eyes widely staring, her throat working in vain attempts to speak.

Captain Gilchrist flung an arm about her waist, at the same time giving a sharp whistle, that quickly brought the Seraphs forward with the horses. Resigning the maiden to one of the ruffians, Gilchrist leaped into a saddle, then bent over to receive his precious captive.

"Look!" he viciously cried, turning her face toward that rapidly increasing glow. "That's the Massasoit House, and your father is lying inside, on his bed, bound and gagged—to slowly roast to death!"

CHAPTER XXXIII. GIVEN TO THE FLAMES.

"FIRE! Fire! The Massasoit is burning, and the whole town is doomed!" came that wild, terror-stricken alarm, just as the four duelists had taken their positions in waiting for the signal from the lips of John Morgan.

For a single breath all was silence, the crowd staring aghast, but then, as that shrill voice rung out in repetition of that wild warning, a confused uproar burst forth.

Gypsy Joe and Dry-throat Johnny opened fire, each sending two rapid shots toward their antagonists, without the formality of waiting for the word of command, and then wheeled to dash away into the gloom cast by a handy building.

With a sharp cry, the Grip-sack Sharp dropped to the ground, but his was simply a cry of warning to his partner as he divined that treacherous action.

The hammer of his pistol fell, but only a dull click followed. The cartridge proved defective; the one out of ten thousand.

Though intended to serve a very different purpose, that warning cry really served the Seraphs, since it for the instant deceived Mack Souders

into believing his friend had been badly hurt. That drew his attention, and before he could realize the truth both Gypsy Joe Jack and Dry-throat Johnny McGee had vanished amid the shadows.

"Follow!" cried Sid, shifting his revolver for another as he dashed at top speed toward the point where the two rascals had disappeared. "You go that way—I'll look to this quarter!"

As it chanced, just there a duplicate course lay open to the outlaws, and there was no time to hunt for sign which might possibly tell which line their flight had followed. Before that could be done, they would have made their escape good beyond all question.

Without stopping to pick and choose, Sid Harper dashed around the corner, straining his keen eyes to the utmost, running on his toes in order to make as little noise as possible while trying to catch a sound of his enemies in flight.

He fancied he had been favored by fortune, for directly ahead he distinguished the rapid trample of heavy feet, and a grim smile came into his face as he noted another fact: the owners of those feet were running at right angles with the course proper to take if they had been bound to the Massasoit House.

"My game, for rocks!" he muttered grimly, pressing forward as swift and silently as a panther on the trail of fresh blood.

Then, all at once, he lost those faintly guiding sounds, and coming to a pause, he bent his head in breathless listening, hoping almost against hope to regain the lost clew.

Although the stars were twinkling and the moon was shining brightly enough, among those irregularly arranged shanties it was an easy matter for a fugitive to dodge aside, and by an abrupt change of course while unseen, thus throw a pursuer off the track.

Fate seemed to frown upon the detective that night, for as he gazed in one direction, two phantom-like forms leaped out upon him from another, striking swift and viciously at that bent head.

Like a log the Grip-sack Sharp fell forward upon his face, and the two Seraphs pounced upon him with all their weight, even then fearful lest he turn the tables upon them, as he had done before.

"Now we have got ye!" viciously panted Gypsy Joe Jack, one hand closing like a vise on that sinewy throat, the other flashing forth a gleaming blade. "Pull out o' the way, Johnny, and let me—"

"Hold hard! None o' that, pard!" warningly muttered McGee as he shifted his grip to that armed hand.

"Why not?" snarled Jack, for the instant too amazed for active resistance. "You standing up for—let loose, or I'll cut you instead of this bloodhound, Dry-throat!"

"Too easy a death, Gypsy, don't you see?"

Both thugs crouched lower, covering their prey with their forms, right hands armed and ready to drive cold steel through his heart rather than lose their longed-for revenge. Both the dimly-seen figures dashed on, shouting forth that hideous alarm at the top of their voices and never once suspecting what a dire tragedy was taking place almost beneath their feet.

"Catch hold, Gypsy, and tote the cur out o' the road," muttered Dry-throat Johnny, grasping their victim by the feet as he spoke. "Back to the shanty, yonder!"

Used to obeying the red-nosed Seraph, as a frequent deputy of Captain Arch-angel, Gypsy Joe Jack obeyed, though sulkily and with an ugly show of teeth.

"We're paid for rubbing him out, ain't we, say?" he snarled.

"But not for pinning our cards on his perforated bosom, to let all that remains of Sodom City in the morning know just how-come-ye-so!" impatiently retorted the portly Seraph. "Don't be a clam, Gypsy! reckon I haven't quite as deep an interest in his death as you?"

Leaving the street, they bore their victim across a weedy patch of ground, reaching a deserted building which stood quite a distance from the other shanties. Dropping the feet of the detective, Dry-throat Johnny placed a shoulder against the dingy door, exerting his strength until the barrier gave way.

"Going to a monstrous sight of trouble!" disgustedly muttered the swarthy Seraph, as McGee came back to again catch up his end of that limp and lifeless burden. "A single push on the handle of a good blade would—"

"Tell all Sodom whose hand had set that same blade to biting, Gypsy," laughed McGee, dropping his end of the burden and squatting across the body of their captive, his hands fumbling in his pockets, come forth with a quantity of strong cord. "Help tie the gentleman, will you?"

"It's so natural for a man to tie both hands behind his back before he commits suicide by cutting his throat or opening a drift through his breast!" snorted Jack in a tone of utter disgust.

"Teach your granny how to milk a rooster. Work—then I'll sink a drift through that foggy brain of yours, pardner!"

Gypsy Joe yielded, as he would have yielded to no other living man, perhaps, and in another

minute the Grip-sack Sharp was securely bound hand and foot.

"None too soon, thanks to your hesitation, Gypsy," chuckled McGee as he felt signs of recovering consciousness on the part of their intended victim. "Go it, rats! kick and squirm all you care to, for you're in the trap safe enough!"

Grip-sack Sid, recovering his senses, tried to rise, struggling desperately until he began to realize something of what had occurred. But when his eyes fell upon those figures, dimly visible by the ruddy glow that came in through the shutterless window and now doorless casement, he abruptly ceased his vain efforts.

"Now I'll answer your doubts, pardner," said Dry-throat Johnny, apparently paying no attention to their prisoner. "All the town knows of our racket with the Sharp, and if he was found with knife or gun-shot wound upon his person, wouldn't the citizens pitch on us as the very ones most likely to know how he caught it? Of course they would!"

"Blast the odds! I'll never let him go free after this night!"

"Of course not," with a vicious nod that lent his words emphasis. "But instead of our killing him, the poor devil came by his death through accident: caught in the fire which he tried to extinguish. Now you begin to see stupid?"

"You mean—"

"To help the boss out in his plans, and at the same time win the reward he offered us. Scratch up some kindlings, can't you?"

Gypsy Joe Jack broke into a low, devilish laugh as he at last divined what his comrade meant, and the two outlaws at once set about putting their Satanic plot into execution.

There was no particular need of using caution in their evil work, for all Sodom was bound up in that raging fire, as yet at a safe distance from that particular shanty. They split and broke up the door and some shelf-boards, shaving kindlings enough to insure a brisk fire, then struck a match and ignited the heap which they had piled up near the middle of the floor.

"It's good-night, Mister Grip-sack!" maliciously grinned the chief Seraph as he half turned to depart. "If any of your friends happen to find and recognize you, after the fire, they'll shed buckets of tears as befitting one who met his death while trying to save the property of strangers."

They vanished, leaving their victim to meet a hideous death. Bound hand and foot, with a snug gag fitted to his jaws that effectually prevented him from calling aloud in hope of bringing assistance, it seemed as though Grip-sack Sid could not possibly escape.

And yet, scarcely had his malignant enemies vanished before he set to work, though the chance was one which only a thoroughly cool, brave, steady-nerved man would even have thought of, much less attempted to carry out.

Though bound, Grip-sack Sid was not tied down to the floor, and rolling over and over, he dashed himself fairly against that pile of blazing kindlings.

Scorched, choking from the thick smoke that rose from the damp stuff, he rolled back, catching a fresh breath only to repeat the attack with still greater desperation.

This time he rolled fairly over the heap, shaken and partially scattered by his first attempt. The fire caught a portion of his garments, but he extinguished this with another revolution, after which he forced his body to revolve in the other direction, again passing directly over the fire, scattering the brands still more effectually.

This greatly fatigued him, to say nothing of the acrid smoke which he could not wholly avoid inhaling through his nostrils, but knowing that it was a fight for dear life, the brave fellow persisted, altering his course as the scattered fire demanded, ceasing only when the work was thoroughly done. Only a few glowing ends remained, and these could work no particular harm as long as they did not burst into a blaze.

Not until this task was accomplished did Grip-sack Sid make any positive efforts to burst his bonds, though he knew that they must have been weakened by the fire, which had severely scorched his person, even through his fairly thick garments.

Pausing only long enough to regain his breath and collect his bodily powers, the Grip-sack Sharp put a terrible strain on his bonds, increasing it as he felt them begin to yield. Yet he was forced to pause, lying almost exhausted, as yet helplessly hampered.

Time and again he made the effort, and finally to be rewarded as he so devoutly wished. The cords about his wrists gave way sufficiently for him to slip out one sorely chafed hand; then the rest was easy.

All this consumed much valuable time, and when Grip-sack Sid crept out of the shanty, the raging fire had wrought much evil, as he could readily estimate by the spread of that ruddy glow. Then—

A dusky figure staggered past him, crouching down beside the very shanty which had been chosen as his funeral pyre, and as a light flashed up, Grip-sack Sid sprang upon the fire-bug!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PINCHING A FIRE-BUG.

ONE of the first to respond to that wild alarm of fire, Fred Benight leaped out of his bed, casting a single glance through the little window of his room, barely long enough to convince him that he had not mistaken the cause of that rapidly growing uproar.

Hurrying on his clothes, he quickly reached the outer air, lending his powerful lungs to swell the alarm even before he realized in just what quarter the fire-fiend had broken forth.

When he caught sight of the hotel, already bursting into flames, a wild, choking cry rose in his throat, for the moment seeming to fairly paralyze his limbs.

He knew that Inza was stopping there, with her wounded father, and the thought of such a hideous doom hanging over her loved head, was almost too great a shock for even his strong nerves to bear up under.

He caught sight of Thomas Massey, bundling his frightened wife out of the blazing building, and sprang toward him with the name of his loved one upon his blanched lips.

"Inza—Miss Laxton—is she safe?" he hoarsely demanded as he caught the dazed landlord by the shoulder, shaking him savagely.

"I don't—God above! I clean forgot the child!" gasped Massey as he dropped his wife and started back, his face full of horror and remorse.

With a cry that was almost as much a curse as it was a groan, the young man sprang up the steps and dashed into the building, recking little what risk he himself might run, just so he could rescue his loved one from those hungry flames.

He dashed up-stairs, opening or bursting in door after door in his blind quest for Inza, growing more and more desperate as he sought in vain. No answer came to his wild shouting of her name, and as he reached the end of the long corridor without finding her whom he sought, he almost sunk to the floor, despairing, his brain reeling drunkenly.

"Here—this way, you!" came a shrill cry, and Benight mechanically obeyed, hoarsely crying as he was met by a grimy, smoke-stained man whose iron grip fastened upon his arm:

"Where—have you found her—my Inza?"

"She's all right—saw her outside," panted the other, dragging him into one of the chambers where a motionless figure lay on a bed. "Here's her father—catch hold—for dear life!"

Dizzy, his brain throbbing madly, his lungs speedily choking up with the acrid smoke which he had inhaled, Fred Benight mechanically obeyed, hardly conscious of what he was doing, only hearing that glad assurance ringing through and through his ears.

"Saved—safe—my darling!" he hoarsely gasped while staggering toward the head of the stairs, the limp and seemingly lifeless body of Pitt Laxton swaying between them. "God—I thank thee!"

Down the steep flight the two men stumbled rather than walked, and still desperately clinging to their heavy burden they plunged through the flame-tinged smoke that was curling about the doorway, to sink exhausted at the edge of the portico in front.

Wild cheers greeted them, and scores of eager hands were outstretched to drag them to perfect safety, others slapping out the fire that had fastened to their garments.

"Where—Miss Laxton!" gasped Fred Benight, staggering to his feet and staring about him with his lashless eyes.

"Hain't bin see'd—dead long afore this, pore gal!" agitatedly blurted out a rough but sympathetic fellow at his elbow.

Fred Benight gave a choking groan, turned as though to plunge once more into that blazing furnace—then fell in a heap, like one instantaneously deprived of life.

"You infernal ass!" angrily grated Mack Souders, though few would have recognized the natty detective at first glance, so black and disfigured by that desperate fight for the life of Pitt Laxton. "Down you go, until you can learn a wee bit o' sense!"

Down the fellow did go, struck by that iron fist directly between the eyes.

Souders hardly glanced at his victim, for he had his hands full enough of work. By his orders Pitt Laxton, the chloroformed sponge cut away from his mouth, his bound limbs released, was carried to a place of safety. Then he assisted the reviving Benight to arise, leading the sorely stricken man away from the crowd.

The fire rapidly spread from the hotel to adjacent buildings, all flimsily built and easy to ignite from even a spark. In vain the citizens fought fire, for if they subdued it in one spot, another broke out in another direction, until even the dullest among them all began to believe that something worse than accident was at the bottom of it all—that fire-bugs were working to destroy the entire town!

It was when the weary, despairing, haggard fire-fighters ceased to labor in vain, lifting hoarse cries and threats against the incendiaries, that Grip-sack came across Mack Souders

and Fred Benight, both of whom were hardly recognizable now.

"Holy smoke!" panted Souders, as he gripped that ready hand, his honest face lighting up even through that grimy covering. "I'd given you up as roasted long ago!"

"As she—my poor, suffering angel!" sobbed Benight, fairly breaking down at last. "Dead—burned to death!"

"He means Miss Laxton, poor fellow," muttered Souders, in hurried explanation. "We couldn't find her in the hotel, and I really fear he's right."

"Devil a bit!" impulsively ejaculated Grip-sack Sid, but then adding, in lower tones. "Help bring him along, pardner. I've got something big to show you, which mustn't be smoked by those lynch-yearning fellows just yet. Catch hold and—so!"

Mack Souders obeyed without wasting time in asking questions, knowing that he would be fully enlightened when the proper time came around.

One strong arm supporting the failing youth on each side, the three men hurried away from the spreading conflagration, soon leaving the town behind them, coming to a halt in a sheltered nook where a few stunted trees afforded both cover and protection from those myriads of floating sparks and whirling embers.

Fred Benight stared vacantly at a figure lying bound and groaning among the bushes, but Mack Souders gave one look, then slapped a thigh in high glee, as his keen wits leaped directly to the truth.

"A fire-bug, by glory!"

"And something worse than that, if possible," grimly nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, as he struck a wax taper and held it close to that bloated, shrinking face.

"Mercy! I didn't do it!" groaned the shivering wretch.

"Oliver Gilchrist, eh?" laughed Souders, gleefully. "Caught in the act, or I'm 'way off my guess! Good! now we have got the gang!"

"I caught him in the act of starting another fire, and found a whole bundle of kerosene fireballs," at the same time passing the taper near enough for them to note the balls of cotton-waste, ready prepared for lighting. "And I reckon he can tell just how the hotel got afire. Eh, you cursed fire-bug?"

"I didn't—he made me!" moaned the utterly unmanned rascal, shivering like a leaf, as Grip-sack Sid flashed a bare blade close to his putty-like face.

"Who made you? Talk straight, and talk mighty quick, or out goes your light too quick for the citizens to lynch you—hear them yell!"

"Pity—don't let—I'll confess all!"

Fred Benight gave a choking roar of terrible fury as he made a spring at the villain's throat, just beginning to realize that to his vile hand that fire was owing. But Souders caught and held him in restraint, while the Grip-sack Sharp added sternly:

"Tell the truth, or we'll let him tear you limb from limb, Noll Gilchrist! Was Inza Laxton in the hotel when the fire broke out?"

"No—carried away by the old man. I didn't—I tried to get out of it, but he made me—swore he'd slit my throat if I didn't!"

Fred Benight ceased his struggles, thrilling to the very core at that assurance. Alive! not burned! Alive—and to be rescued!

Fairly overcome by that joyous thought, so vastly different from the horrible belief which had been forced upon him, Fred sunk down, utterly overcome for the time being.

"Whom do you mean by old man?" demanded Harper, still keeping that terrorizing blade in prominent view. "Your father, Warren Gilchrist?"

The cur uttered a moaning assent, almost too badly frightened to articulate. Then Harper added:

"If I turn you over to the citizens, they'll roast you alive; but I'll do it unless you confess where your father took the lady. Will you swear to guide us to that retreat if we spare you the fire?"

"I swear—only show mercy—spare my wretched life!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

"ONLY DEATH CAN SAVE YOU!"

WITH the fiery glow illuminating the heavens above them, that craven cur was forced to confess all, showing no reluctance about sacrificing his mates or his father, even, when his terrified brain once fairly comprehended what was wanted of him.

And knowing that Inza was living and unharmed, being held for a wedding which should never take place, Fred Benight quickly rallied from the terrible shock he had received, and was one of the busiest workers in the plan which was speedily laid out by the two detectives.

And before that red glare entirely died away, leaving two-thirds of Sodom in smoldering ruins; before the sun began to lighten the skyline toward the east, a number of heavily-armed men silently moved away from town, one by one, all rendezvousing at a point indicated by the Grip-sack Sharp, who assumed command of the party.

Among them were Pitt Laxton, pale, haggard, emaciated, but seemingly little the worse for his wound or the torments of the night just past; Fred Benight, from whom Laxton carefully kept his eyes averted; Mack Souders and Oliver Gilchrist.

The last-named had agreed to guide the Grip-sack Sharp to the cavern in which his father would be awaiting the coming of his hopeful cub, on condition that he should not be turned over to the citizens of the fire-scourged town as an incendiary. Beyond this Harper would not promise.

Horses were provided for the party, and until they gained a point comparatively near to the end of their journey, the animals were pressed to a brisk pace. Then, deeming it unwise to advance further without having the lay of the ground carefully spied out by a trustworthy man, Grip-sack Sid called a halt, deep down in a secluded valley, sending Mack Souders on as scout.

To make the most of their time, Sidney Harper caused a hamper to be unpacked, placing food and drink before his recruits, knowing that few, if any, of them had broken fast since the evening before.

There was one member of the party, however, who showed no longing for food, drawing apart from the remainder, plainly chafing at the delay, even while his common sense approved of its object.

This was Pitt Laxton, and presently Grip-sack Sid approached him, paying no attention to that involuntary shivering which followed his coming. Passing a hand through the wounded miner's arm, he slowly moved along until completely bidden from the little squad of men about the cold, but grateful breakfast.

"You were in bed when I paid the visit I promised you, last night, Carl Bassett," began the detective, his voice low and even, but cold and remorseless as fate. "I let it pass, then, and I'm sorry, now, for what I have to say will fall with doubled force."

"You are not—who are you?" hoarsely asked the shivering man.

"Arthur Benight married my sister. You killed him. His death sent her to an untimely grave, but not before she swore me to avenge her terrible loss on the foul assassin."

"I did not—"

"Would you try to lie me down even yet, Carl Bassett?" sternly frowned the Grip-sack Sharp, his eyes glittering like molten steel.

For almost the first time since their coming together, Pitt Laxton showed signs of genuine manhood, drawing his tall form erect, facing the man who had trailed him down without a tremor. And his voice was clear and steady as he spoke:

"Hear me out, sir, for I was not about to lie. I did kill Arthur Benight, but it was while my brain was bemused by drink, and my blood heated to madness by his taunts. I killed him, and an instant later I would have given my own life could that have restored my friend to his family!"

"Yet you robbed him, and fled!"

"Fled, but the man who says I robbed him lies!"

For a brief space their eyes met, but neither flinched. Carl Bassett looked like one who was speaking the truth, and Harper let the point pass unargued.

"You killed him. In striking him, you murdered my only sister as well. She left me word—I was far away at the time—and as her dying bequest, begged me to see that the foul deed was amply avenged."

"I went to her grave, and kneeling beside the mound—only one, for even in death she lay upon his breast—I made oath to never forget her prayer, but to work until I had found the assassin, and brought him to the gallows."

"I have found you, Carl Bassett, and, in justice to the dead, I ought to have placed you in irons long ago. But there may be a chance for you to cheat the hangman's noose, even yet!"

A swift light leaped into that haggard face, and his eyes asked the question which his pale lips refused to form.

"You know that Fred, yonder, is the son of your victims. He is my nephew, though he is yet ignorant of that fact, and shall remain so until your fate and his is fully decided."

"He is a good lad, honest, industrious, white as man ever gets to be in this every-day world. He loves your Inza, and—"

"Spare her—my poor little girl!" huskily whispered Laxton.

"Will you spare her?" swiftly asked the detective, his grip tightening, his eyes all aglow as he forced those sunken orbs to meet his gaze. "Will you give her the one frail chance that remains?"

"I'll willingly die for her sake!"

Sidney Harper laughed shortly, strangely, then continued:

"I've granted you a respite, and now I'll tell you just what that means. Your daughter is in peril of worse than death. We may not be able to rescue her living from the grip of that human bull-dog. But if we do, and if

you truly love her, pray with all your soul that you may be a corpse before her freedom is won!"

Again their eyes met, and once more the ghost of a smile crept into the face of the man whose right hand was reddened by the blood of his youthful friend.

"If I do fall—and it may well be so, for Warren Gilchrist will fight like the bull-dog to which you have likened him, when cornered—you will swear to keep my terrible secret from my little girl?"

"On conditions," was the cold response. "Remember, Carl Bassett, that only death can save you from arrest; only death can keep me from putting you in double irons as an assassin, to drag from this to the noose of the hangman."

"But if death comes to me?" persisted the doomed miner.

"Then—if you go to the son of Arthur and Julia Benight, saying that you have misjudged him in the past but are willing to make all amends for the future—if you say that you consent to his marrying your daughter—I promise on my honor to keep the whole sad truth a secret from her."

Pitt Laxton shivered, huskily muttering:

"I killed his father—to marry him, she would—"

"She was not born then. She had no lot or part in your crime. It is not right for children to suffer for their parents' crimes. Will you come with me—to Fred Benight?"

There was a brief struggle, then the doomed murderer yielded. His cold, clammy hand fell into the outstretched palm of the detective, and side by side they walked back to where Fred Benight was sitting.

The young man sprang to his feet as he caught sight of their grave faces, his own turning a shade paler as Harper paused, letting Pitt Laxton advance a pace or two alone.

"Mr. Benight," said Laxton, his voice very low but clear and unshaken as he extended his right hand. "Will you forgive my rudeness?"

His hand was clasped, but the young man could not find words just then with which to fitly express his glad surprise.

"I acknowledge that I have treated you harshly; that I have not done you justice, in words nor in thoughts; but I was led on by my love for Inza, and the fear of losing her dear company forever. Now—if she is saved—and if you still wish it—I'll no longer stand between you and my little girl!"

"God bless you for this, Mr. Laxton," brokenly uttered Benight, wringing that bony hand with an ardor even greater than his emotion.

"May you be happy with each other. Guard her as a jewel, and—pray for the soul of her unhappy father!"

Despite his stern resolve to hold his feelings in check, these words burst forth, and dropping that hand, Pitt Laxton strode hastily away.

"I wouldn't, lad," said Harper, checking Benight as he started to follow. "He might take it hard. The spell is on him now, and he has a presentiment that he'll never come through this racket alive. Let him go—and when all is over; when we've got the little lady again, and see her in his arms; we'll laugh over his silly forebodings, you and I."

"All the same, Heaven's blessing rest upon his dear old head!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE BULL-DOG IN HIS KENNEL.

"WHAT the foul fiend can be keeping the lad? Can he—devil toast the evil imp that keeps thrusting that bitter black thought into my brain!"

Warren Gilchrist was sitting at the same rude table in the dark den where we saw him hire the three Seraphs to compass the death of the human bloodhounds on his trail.

He had been drinking heavily, mainly to his anticipated triumph over his enemies and his speedy realization of his golden dreams, but through all came a haunting fear for the safety of his uncouth but fairly idolized cub, Oliver.

He had been left behind, with several others of the family, to cover that daring abduction and keep their enemies busy fighting the flames. Those others had returned to the rendezvous, safe and sound, reporting that Sodom City was in a fair way of vanishing from sight and existence; but nothing was seen or heard of Oliver Gilchrist.

On being questioned closely, the fire-bugs admitted that their sub-chief had drank heavily while at work, and that he had shown plain signs of drunkenness before they lost sight of him; but they declared, too, that though they had not left town until nearly dawn, no arrests had been made by the excited citizens.

Expecting the return of his cub with each passing minute, Warren Gilchrist waited until the new day grew old, fighting back the dread fear that his loved cub had fallen into the hands of the enemy.

"If he has—if harm comes to him through them—I'll wipe the town and citizens from the earth!" he viciously snarled. "I'll never know rest while a man who played part in his death—

who even participated as simple spectator—draws the breath of life!"

Still, he fought stubbornly to keep down that dread fear. He told himself over and over that the lad had been overcome with liquor, and was now sleeping off its effects.

"He isn't to blame—he overworked himself," muttering, as he knocked the neck from a fresh bottle to freshen his dry throat. "The boys say that he more'n did himself proud—that he set two fires to their one! Gallant lad! They'll think twice before sneering at my noble Noll after this!"

Time and again he called to his men, who wisely kept aloof from the human bull-dog when they saw how heavily he was drinking. Again and yet again they were forced to report that nothing had been seen of his son.

Then, unable longer to sit idly waiting, with only a bottle to keep him company as he fought back those ugly fears, Warren Gilchrist pushed back his seat and taking the nearest candle, moved back toward the second enlargement or chamber.

He staggered a little as he first gained his feet, but with an effort he steadied himself, banishing the effects of the strong waters, only betraying his deep potations by his purpled face and glassy eyes.

He paused when fairly inside the second chamber, holding the candle above his head the better to distinguish objects before him, uttering a savage curse at the heavy gloom.

Lifting his voice in a roar that brought half a dozen men running in hot haste to his side, he ordered them to kindle a fire and light more candles.

"Make it light, ye devils! Make it rival the sun at noonday! It's my son's bridal morn, curse ye all! Would you make him borrow the eyes of a bat in order to tell his charming bride from a roll of midnight? Light up—light up until you have to cover your eyes to keep them from being blinded!"

Hastily as possible the Seraphs obeyed, lighting a score or more of candles, sticking them on each projection from the rock-walls, until the drunken savage bade them begone and leave him alone with his new daughter.

For resting on a rude couch of grass, covered over with a blanket, was Inza Laxton, pale as a corpse which she resembled in all save her open eyes, filled with mingling terror and grief.

"Look here, little water-spout," frowned the bull-dog, noting her pale, tear-marked cheeks. "That won't do. Noll is coming, and he'll kick like a bay steer if he finds a Niobe instead of a Venus. Dry up—what've you got to snivel over, I'd like to know?"

"My poor, dear father!" sobbed the wretched girl.

"Your poor—oh, shoot such a father!" scowled the drunken ruffian. "What if he is dead and cooked to a turn? It's only a foretaste of what he'll suffer through all eternity, if gospel-sharps tell the truth!"

"You merciless villain!" flashed Inza, passionately, striving to rise erect but failing because of her bonds. "I could kill you for that! You, such as you to insult my poor—"

"Look here, daughter-in-law," deliberately said Gilchrist, lurching forward and squatting down before his captive, shaking a stumpy forefinger in her pale face as he added: "It's time you and I had a bit of a talk. It's high time we came to a good understanding. And as the shortest method of getting there with both feet—here goes!"

"You try to shove off your old dad as a saint on wheels. You lift him up before my eyes as a model fit for an angel to copy in every detail. And when you do that, you shine out so green that a cow would nip you close to the ground in a holy hurry!"

"In reality—but whoa, January!" drawing back his head with a jerk that sent his battered hat tumbling down past his ruddy nose. "I'm crowding the mourners, don't you reckon? And so—for the last time, Becky Jane, will you play white—will you pretend you're sensible, and make my gallant boy Noll a true and 'bedient wife?"

"I'd sooner wed with a rattlesnake! I'd rather die ten thousand deaths combined in one!" hotly flashed the indignant maiden.

"Then—g'long, January!" with a vicious show of teeth as he resumed his former attitude. "And—now to pluck the snow-white plume from the wings of your sainted pappy, little rosebud!"

"Who are you to sneer and scoff and scold at the bare idea of mating with my Noll? I'll tell you, precious pet!"

"The daughter of a common murderer! The only child of a man who took the friendly cover of night to stab his bosom comrade! The spawn of a man who robbed his victim, then fled for his life!"

"You—'tis a bitter, black, shameful lie!" panted Inza, almost beside herself.

"'Tis the simple truth, you little fire-brand," nodded the bull-dog, with malicious emphasis as he added: "And the man your father murdered with a coward's blow from behind was named Arthur Benight. And that murdered man had a son. And that murderer's daughter fell in love with the son of her father's victim!"

Driven utterly reckless by the strong liquor that had mounted to his brain, muddling his usually keen, cool wits, Warren Gilchrist blurted out all his secrets without reserve.

Inza Laxton, stricken dumb by that hideous revelation, though she would not, could not believe it, lay back on the couch without word or motion, only her brilliant eyes telling that she was alive and awake.

"Laugh me to scorn, do ye, child of a murderer?" coarsely laughed the ruffian. "I'm not fit to be answered, eh? Well, reckon I'm able to talk for us both, and it's my sacred duty to keep you amused until your gallant bridegroom arrives to relieve me."

"Do you think it so strange that I'd consent to mix my pure and honest blood with such a muddy current as flows through the veins of the Laxton—I mean the Bassett tribe? Well, gold is a mighty purifier, and when you're once safely Mrs. Noll Gilchrist, you'll be rich enough to throw nuggets at the cats!"

"There's the secret bonanza your hypocritical old dad used to work before Satan claimed him. And there's double as much back o' that all, which your sainted pap dared not lay claim to, lest by making his real name known, the grip of the hangman would close on his shoulder."

"It's that fortune I'm playing my little game for, you want to understand, pretty-by-night. You're to marry my gallant Noll. I've got a regular ordained gospel-sharp in limbo not fifty feet from where you are resting this minute, honey-bud, and to save his precious life, be sure he'll not stop to ask too many or too impertinent questions before tying the knot that lasts through time—well, leave eternity out! Noll may see a face he'll fancy even above yours, after he and I have fairly raked in your fortune!"

With a hideous, cackling laugh, the foul villain squatted before his victim, rubbing his hands in unholy glee at the picture his thick but free-running tongue had drawn. But before he could say more, a dark shape came flying from out the gloom beyond, hoarsely crying:

"Die, you foul villain! Die—die—curse you!"

And grappling Gilchrist by the throat, he flashed a knife downward, to lift it for another blow, streaming with red blood!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MAKING USE OF A CUR.

FRED BENIGHT was too thoroughly happy to need much argument. The man who had clearly wrought him so much good, could not possibly be in the wrong, and whatever he might say must go without questioning.

So, though the lover longed to join the relenting father, and show him if in never so small a degree, how he honored and loved him for removing the serious obstacles he had placed in the course of true love and its proper fruition, he refrained. And, in good sooth, he had enough to do to keep from betraying his joyous secret to the entire party.

Perhaps it was just as well that Mack Souders returned from his scouting expedition at about that juncture, for his coming gave Fred Benight something else to think about.

"I reckon he's played it fairly straight so far," with a nod in the direction of their enforced guide. "I found both openings, just as he described them, and found them guarded."

"That settles it, then," grimly smiled the Grip-sack Sharp, his gray eyes catching the battle light. "Our game is inside. All we've got to do is to close in upon it from both ends."

"Just as easy as saying so, isn't it?" softly laughed Souders, a humorous twinkle in his eyes. "Of course they'll stand up for us to knock down. They wouldn't even think of showing their teeth."

"It's all part of the day's work, pardner, and you'd be the last man to flinch from hard knocks. Still—maybe we can get the bulge on 'em."

Grip-sack Sid passed over to where Oliver Gilchrist, his hands in irons before him, was sullenly waiting and watching.

"You told one truth, and still survive, I see," was his blunt address, closely watching the face of his prisoner while adding: "It is crowding things pretty hard to ask another miracle, but reckon I'll have to do it. How many rascals does it take to keep watch and ward over the back door to your little paradise yonder?"

"Only one," was the sulky reply. "I never knew more stationed there at one time."

"One is a big plenty, but I reckon we can get over that, if you are still fond of life. Don't feel in the suicidal way, do you?"

"I feel as though I was going to be murdered—by you!" shivered the wretch, his voice quivering and growing husky. "Don't kill me, gentlemen! I'm not fit to die, and I'll do everything you can possibly ask of me."

"Even to shoot your evil old dad?"

"I wouldn't be here, only for his teaching," sullenly muttered the bull-dog cub; and Grip-sack Sid would not press that point further.

"All right. I reckon we can put you to some use, after all. And first, let me rid you of those bracelets, please."

Suiting the action to his words, Grip-sack Sid quickly set the rascal at liberty, so far as his limbs were concerned, but coldly cut short the fawning, curish thanks which Gilchrist started to pour upon him, with:

"Button up! I'm talking, and you're to listen, at the same time bearing in mind that I'll never offer you a second chance if you fail to catch this one on the jump."

"We're going in that hole to make a clean sweep. If we have to fight our way from the first step, so much the worse for those we pin up between two fires. And so much the worse for you, my fine rascal!"

"There's at least one man on guard at the rear entrance. I'm going to gain a position directly above his place of hiding, and I want you to go over yonder and manage some way to draw him out where I can get a fair chance at the fellow. Will you do it?"

"Alone? Without those irons on me?" quickly asked Gilchrist, his piggy eyes catching an ugly glitter before he could veil them.

"Once a fool, always an idiot!" frowned the Grip-sack Sharp, only too readily divining that treacherous hope. "You'll be covered both behind and before, you rascal, and at the faintest sign of double-play, you'll be riddled like a sifter!"

"I didn't—I wouldn't—"

"Tell the truth if you know how," finished Mack Souders. "Don't bother with the cur, pardner. Let me slit his lying throat, and then I'll play decoy duck to the royal taste!"

"Don't—I'll do it—only spare me, gentlemen!" gasped the cowardly wratch, ready to say or do anything by means of which he might prolong his worthless existence.

"All right; we'll give you the chance," nodded the Grip-sack Sharp, curtly adding: "Try to brace up, for if you botch your job, salt won't save you!"

Drawing Mack Souders aside, he bade Fred Benight keep an eye on Gilchrist, then asked the detective to take him to a point from whence he could distinctly note the rear entrance and its surroundings.

This did not consume much time, and after spending a few minutes in active use of his eyes Grip-sack Sid nodded his approval.

"It can be done, and easy as falling off a log, if only that cur does his share as he should. Is he badly enough scared to play along the line we marked out, think, pardner?"

"If not, he will be before you get to cover," grimly laughed the detective as they turned to retrace their steps. "You trust him to me, Harper, and I'll go bail there'll be no fizzle from our end of the train."

Ten minutes later, all was arranged. The little band was divided, the greater portion sent around to steal up as near the main entrance as was prudent, there to await the signal to close in on the Seraphs.

The other, containing the two detectives, Pitt Laxton, Fred Benight and Oliver Gilchrist, with a couple of picked men from Sodom City, were to strike from the rear.

With full confidence in his partner, Grip-sack Sid stole away in advance, following the line marked out while inspecting the location in company with Mack Souders, carrying out his purpose with a rapidity and caution combined that spoke volumes for his skill as a scout or spy. And then, when fairly above the rocky ledge in which the rear entrance to the Retreat was located, he gave a signal which meant for the detective to send Gilchrist on his important mission.

Oliver Gilchrist fully comprehended the fact that he was playing a part in which failure meant certain death, and the love of life led him to act with unusual shrewdness and ability.

He could see that Sidney Harper held him covered with a magazine rifle, and he knew that he was equally covered from the rear. The least crooked work would be the signal for a fire that would surely convert his carcass into a novel strainer.

Playing the part of a half-drunken man, Oliver Gilchrist pursued his unsteady way toward the entrance, steadying himself as he came near enough to recognize the Seraph on guard, calling out:

"Hello! Dry-throat Johnny McGeel! Where's the old man and the young lady?"

"Back in the Den, waiting and growing mighty hot, too," the portly member replied, stepping forth from cover in his eagerness to greet his sub-chief; for he, too, had been roughly cursed by Captain Arch-angel for having left Sodom City without his master.

He had time to say no more, for like a panther Grip-sack Sid leaped down upon him, striking him with both feet on the shoulders, driving him headlong to the flinty ground, stunning him most effectually.

Agile as a cat, the Grip-sack Sharp recovered his balance, whirling toward the tunnel with ready pistols. But the precaution was needless.

Dry-throat Johnny had been alone on guard, and satisfied of this, Harper covered Oliver with a pistol, sternly warning him against moving until the remainder of the party came up.

Dry-throat Johnny and Oliver Gilchrist were bound and gagged, despite the trembling protests of the decoy. Then, with Grip-sack Sid at their head, the rescuing party entered the tunnel, following the minute directions given by the bull-dog's cub.

Fortunately the distance was not very great, and their progress was fairly rapid until the faint glimmer of lights ahead came to them through the intense gloom. Then a single figure pressed past the Grip-sack Sharp.

"Stop him!" hoarsely muttered Fred Benight, recognizing in that pioneer the wounded parent of his loved one, but Harper sternly held him back for a brief space; then—

As a savage outcry broke forth in advance, Harper cried:

"On, men! Kill every devil who resists, but spare those who yell for quarter!"

Himself in the lead, the party quickly sprung out into the chamber which Warren Gilchrist had caused to be so brilliantly lighted, just in time to meet the alarmed Seraphs as they came flocking through the opposite entrance, Gypsy Joe Jack at their head.

And Pitt Laxton was locked in a death-grapple with Captain Arch-angel!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ATONEMENT OF BLOOD.

THE fight was hot and deadly while it lasted, but the Seraphs had been taken so completely by surprise, that their efforts were not concerted, and when men are "fighting on their own hook," with fresh enemies coming up from the rear, just when they are hard-pressed in front, it calls for more than purely brute courage to hold out long.

Gypsy Joe Jack was one of the first to fall, a bullet from Grip-sack Sid's revolver making a ghastly spot between his dark eyes, even as the ruffian tried to drive a wicked-looking blade into the heart of the detective.

Then—with abject cries of quarter, the surviving outlaws dropped their weapons, and were taken prisoners.

Not until then did Grip-sack Sid have time to look about for Pitt Laxton or for his daughter.

Inza, as yet only conscious of her rescue, was lying in the strong arms of her lover, hardly conscious, yet faintly responding to his passionate kisses.

Pitt Laxton—after one hasty look, Grip-sack Sid passed over to the lovers, hurriedly advising Fred Benight to take the girl from that spot to the broad light of day.

Turning pale and showing real emotion as he divined something of the truth, Benight obeyed, carrying the maiden in his strong arms, while Harper lighted them to the front entrance with a candle.

"Is he—not—"

A swift gesture cut short his hesitating query, and then Grip-sack Sid turned back to the chamber of death.

Brief though his absence had been, he found Mack Souders had worked wonders. All the captured Seraphs were securely bound, and those who were wounded were being looked after by Dr. Grable.

The worthy physician was kneeling by the side of Pitt Laxton, but he was making no use of his tools. And by his terror-like face Harper knew that Carl Bassett had won his eternal secrecy.

"How long can he live, do you think, doctor?" gravely asked the detective, as he saw those sunken eyes slowly open.

"An hour; possibly two; not more," was the low response.

"Inza—little woman?" faintly gasped the wounded miner.

"Is safe, and with her lover," gravely said Harper, kneeling and taking those feebly working fingers. "Shall we carry you out to see her? Do you think she can stand it, after all she's been called on to undergo?"

"She must—I want to—see her before—promise again?"

"I promise," was the earnest response, and with a faint sigh of relief, the wounded man closed his eyes.

Seeking death in two-fold shape, Pitt Laxton had done his work well, and the earthly career of Captain Arch-angel was finished. His evil life had found half a score openings through which to flee, even though his bull-dog grit had enabled him to mortally wound his adversary.

With a blanket taken from the rude couch, a littler was shaped, on which the dying miner was carried out of the cavern and across to where Inza was waiting.

It was a painful scene, and one on which dwelling would be unpleasant both to reader and recorder.

After her first wild outburst of grief, Inza shudderingly recalled those foul charges which Warren Gilchrist had brought against her parent, and though she would not for an instant place reliance or belief in them, still she could not refrain from alluding to them.

Pitt Laxton—as he must be called, to the end

—shivered convulsively, his sunken eyes turning appealingly toward the Grip-sack Sharp.

Sidney Harper at once came to the rescue, taking a hand each of the lovers, joining them together as he distinctly spoke:

"There was a portion of truth in the words spoken by Warren Gilchrist, however many foul lies he may have added to it. Arthur Benight was murdered, and by a man named Carl Bassett. The assassin did flee, and to this day has escaped arrest for his crime."

"I have hunted him for years, and I'll hunt him still!" flashed Fred, sternly. "But Mr. Laxton cannot be that vile criminal."

"Let me finish, please," frowned Harper. "The murder of Arthur Benight caused the death of his wife. Before she died, she wrote a full account of the crime, directing it to her only brother, begging him to see that justice was done, though it took a lifetime."

"That letter came to me, and I swore to carry out its wishes, at all hazards. I swore that I would find the murderer, and find him, I would drag him back to suffer death on the gallows."

"Do you wonder why I took this oath? Why I felt such a deep interest in the case? Because," his voice growing softer as he clasped the hands of the lovers warmly, "you are my nephew, Fred."

"But your name isn't—"

"For the present it is Sidney Harper," was the swift interposition. "Arthur Benight married my only sister. His death killed her. From her grave came a solemn prayer that I would avenge their untimely fate; and I took the oath of vengeance!"

"Now—I join your hands together, and in public give my soon-to-be relative an uncle's kiss. Would I do that if Pitt Laxton was Carl Bassett? Would I let him go unarrested, all this time? Would I have risked my life fighting for him against the Seraphs of Sodom?"

A faint sound came from the pale lips of the dying miner, and Inza knelt beside him, sobbing as though her heart would break.

A faint sign, and Grip-sack Sid gently forced Fred to kneel by the side of his sweetheart. And then, feebly joining their hands, Pitt Laxton breathed his last blessing on their union.

As the sun went down, so his life passed away.

His end was peaceful, free from physical pain, and Sidney Harper by his public utterance had robbed death of half its moral terrors.

His hands deep dyed with human blood, his soul stained with a mortal sin, committed in the heat of passion, it is not for these lines to declare that he had not sufficiently repented through all those long years of brooding silence.

The Seraphs were ironed and taken to what remained of Sodom City. Their connection with the conflagration was kept a secret, as far as possible, and though there were ugly threats and one actual effort to start a wholesale lynching-bee, the two detectives managed to stave it off until they completed arrangements to take their prisoners to a safer place of waiting for trial.

Oliver Gilchrist, convicted of being a leader in the road-agent band, was sentenced to a long term of years. Parson Thede Able was found guilty of murder, up country, and in due course of time paid the penalty with his worthless life.

Dry-throat Johnny bore his sub-chief company to prison, and shortly after died in stripes.

Others of the Seraphs received such terms as their proven crimes seemed to deserve, though there was difficulty in bringing to full proof the darker sins laid at their door.

The "gospel sharp" spoken of by Gilchrist, was released, with a golden salve for his injured feelings.

In due time the "secret bonanza" was sold, and then, with his fair young wife, Fred Benight went back to Maryland, to prove her rights to the fortune left by old Winter Bassett, who had gone to his grave a stubborn believer in the complete innocence of his kinsman, Carl.

Grip-sack Sid bore them company, together with Mack Souders, but he could not content himself with humdrum life on a Southern plantation, and shortly after the estate was fairly settled, he turned his face once more toward the setting sun.

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